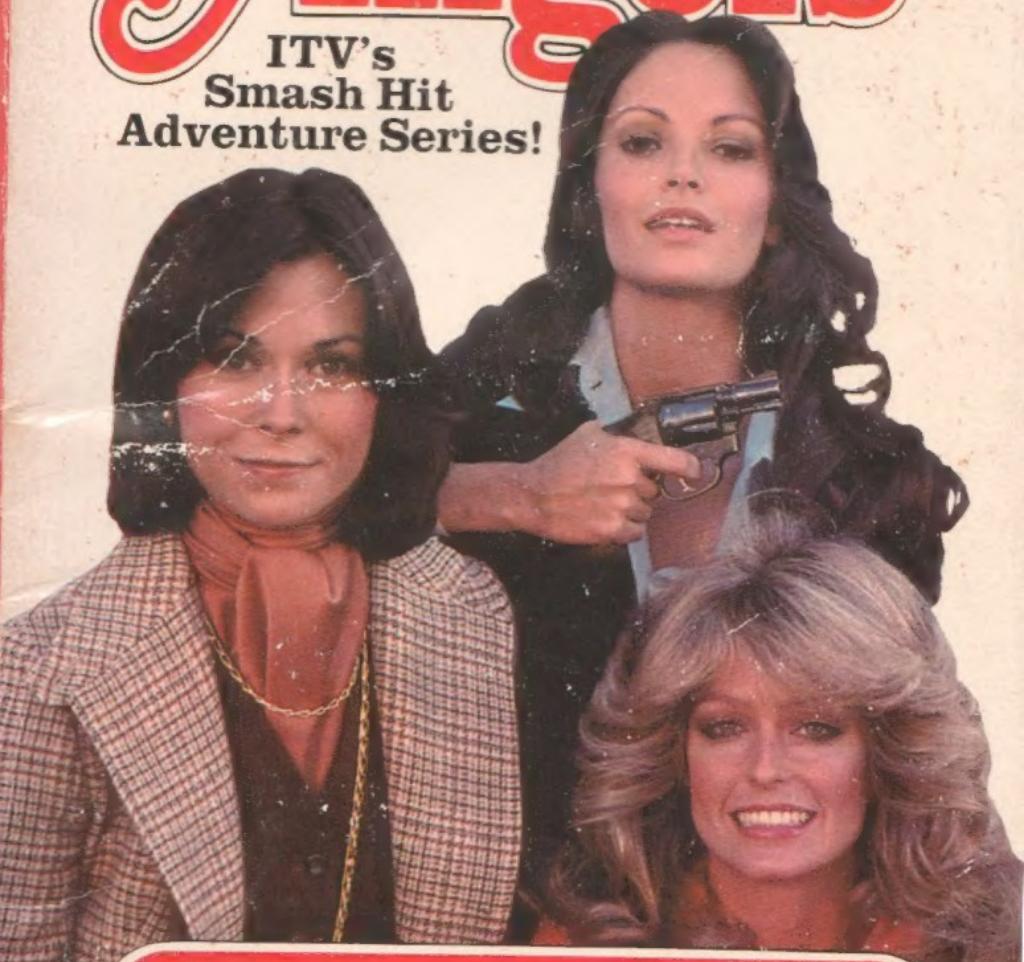


Charlie's Angels

ITV's
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Adventure Series!



Those three heaven-sent hell raisers break into jail to bust up a deadly behind-bars crime ring!

#4 ANGELS IN CHAINS

Created by

IVAN GOFF and BEN ROBERTS

Based on the script by **ROBERT EARLL**

Adapted by **MAX FRANKLIN**

Angels behind bars . . .

"Have you finished checking out the new ones yet?" Warden Velma Sorenson asked Sheriff Clint over the telephone.

"Uh-huh. We lucked out. Kelly Garrett and Sabrina Duncan are A-one candidates. Far as I can tell, nobody gives a damn what happens to either one."

"What about Jill Munroe?" the warden asked.

"Talked to a guy in El Paso Police Department. She's got no rap sheet as an adult, but they remember her as a wild teenager. Boy crazy, on pot, kicked out by her parents at sixteen. Then she run off with some married guy who stuck up a bunch of filling stations before they both got caught. He went to prison, she was tried as a juvenile and just got probation. They ain't seen her in recent years, but this guy heard she's been hitch-hiking around the country, livin' in communes, and shakin' up with 'most any guy who comes along. She sure shouldn't have any objection to the house."

"Sounds good," Warden Sorenson said in a pleased voice . . .

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CHARLIE'S ANGELS

#4

Angels in Chains

Created by

Ivan Goff and Ben Roberts

Based upon the script
"Angels in Chains" by
Robert Earll

Adapted by
Max Franklin

A SPELLING-GOLDBERG PRODUCTION

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One

As dusk neared, Elizabeth Hunter decided she had better find a campsite. She was familiar enough with Louisiana bayou country to travel it in relative safety in the daytime, but it was too risky at night. There was always the chance of blundering into quicksand in the dark, or worse, into a poisonous snake.

She was hiking along the edge of a bayou. She came to a place where a fallen log about two feet in diameter spanned the water over to a small island with a few trees on it. It looked like an ideal campsite, grassy and clear of underbrush. Crossing over the log, she eased her backpack to the ground with a sigh of relief.

After spreading out her sleeping bag in the center of the island, she crossed back over the log bridge to gather firewood. By the time she had a fire going and had started cooking dinner, it was dark.

Although she was in virtually uninhabited country, the island was no more than fifty yards from a narrow two-lane highway along which she heard an occasional vehicle pass. She had just scalded her mess kit in boiling water, dumped the water, and put everything away when she heard a car pull over and park on the road shoulder.

Looking that way, she saw the car lights go out. Two car doors slammed and she saw the silhouettes of two men wearing Stetsons heading her way.

Elizabeth felt for the haft of the hunting knife strapped to her hip. She was a slim, attractive girl in

her early twenties, and while so far she had never encountered any rapists on her solitary backpacking trips, she had several times been bothered by men pushy enough to require her to back them off at knife-point.

The two men came across the log bridge, a heavy-set man in the lead, a tall, lean man following. When they moved within the circle of firelight and she saw their uniforms and badges, she dropped her hand from the hilt of her hunting knife and relaxed.

"Evening, miss," the heavyset man drawled. He was in his forties, had wide, heavy jowls and black, ropelike eyebrows that ran straight across his forehead in a thick, unbroken line.

"Good morning," Elizabeth said.

The heavyset man said, "I'm Burton Clint, sheriff of Pine Parish." He jerked a thumb at the lean man, who was in his thirties and had a cold, totally expressionless face. "My chief deputy, Sam Crowder."

"How are you?" Elizabeth said politely. "My name is Elizabeth Hunter."

Sheriff Clint looked her up and down thoroughly, with a measuring expression on his face that began to make Elizabeth uneasy. Finally he asked, "Miss or Mrs.?"

"Miss," she said, slightly surprised by the question.

"Got some ID?"

She took a wallet from her jeans pocket, extracted a driver's license, and handed it to him. After studying it, he handed it back and she put it away.

"New Orleans, eh?" he said. "Live with your parents?"

"My parents are dead."

"My sympathy," he said without sympathy. "Got a fiancé or boy friend?"

"I'm quite alone, Sheriff," she said, frowning. "Why are you asking me all this?"

"Just wondered if you had anybody could bail you out."

Elizabeth's eyes widened. "Bail me out?"

"Got to arrest you, Miss Hunter. This here's a parish park you're in. Campin's against the law, and so's buildin' a fire."

"There aren't any signs," Elizabeth said indignantly.

"Ignorance of the law ain't no excuse," the sheriff said. "That's an old, established legal principle." He turned to his chief deputy. "Sam, take a look through her stuff."

Nodding, the deputy went over to kneel next to her musette bag and begin going through it.

With increased indignation Elizabeth demanded, "Do you have a search warrant?"

"Don't need one when you got probable cause of a crime," the sheriff drawled. "Your eye pupils show you're high on something."

Her indignation became outrage. She glared at him, too angry to speak.

Deputy Sam Crowder rose to his feet and exhibited a small plastic envelope. Opening it, he licked a finger, touched it to the white powder in the envelope and tasted the few grains that stuck to the tip of his finger.

"Horse," he said to the sheriff.

"You planted that!" Elizabeth shot at him. Swinging on the sheriff, she snapped, "What are you trying to pull?"

"You junkies all try that innocent act," Sheriff Clint said in a bored tone. "Get your hands behind your back."

Taking handcuffs from his belt, he started toward her. Whipping out her knife, Elizabeth fell into a crouch.

Halting, the sheriff said in a pleased tone, "Well, well. ADW on a police officer. Take her, Sam."

The lean deputy moved with the speed of a striking snake. Before she could spin around, he was in back of her and had whipped both wrists behind her. Thumb pressure on the inside of her right wrist caused her fingers to jerk wide apart, letting the knife fall

to the ground. The sheriff stepped behind her and the cuffs clicked into place.

"We'll need this," the sheriff said, stooping to recover the knife. "Evidence. Sam, you gather up her stuff and I'll put her in the car."

The heavyset man prodded her across the bridge and over to the police car parked on the road shoulder. Making her get into the back seat, he slid in next to her.

The lean Sam Crowder put out the fire, and shortly thereafter appeared with Elizabeth's bedroll and backpack. Stowing them in the car trunk, he slid behind the wheel and drove off.

They had driven only a couple of miles when the headlights picked up a roadside sign: RUSTIC PINES - POP. 30. Crowder slowed the car to pull in next to a small one-story building. The two men got out, and the sheriff ordered Elizabeth to get out too.

Glancing around as she got out of the car, Elizabeth saw that the village consisted of only about ten buildings. The night was sufficiently moonlit for her to make them out clearly. There was one long, one-story building with a roofed porch running all along its front, and with two doors leading into the building. Over the nearer one was a sign reading GENERAL STORE. The sign over the other read DISTRICT COURT NO. 13. The small building they were parked next to had a sign on it reading SHERIFF'S SUBSTATION NO. 2. The rest of the buildings were simply houses.

Although it was only about nine-thirty P.M., there was not a light showing in any of the buildings.

The sheriff opened the front door of the substation and switched on an inside light. Elizabeth followed him in, and Sam Crowder followed her, carrying her bedroll and backpack. Dropping them on the floor, he closed the door and drew the window shades.

The room they were in was an office running the full width of the building. At its rear were two doors, both open, one leading into what appeared to be living quarters, the other leading into a hallway where Eliza-

beth could see two barred cells. After pulling the shades, Crowder picked up Elizabeth's gear, carried it through the second doorway, and tossed it into one of the cells.

Sheriff Clint proceeded to give Elizabeth an unnecessarily thorough shakedown. He stooped to run his hands over her legs, then rose to his feet to pat her pockets and her waist. When his hands rose to her breasts, she stiffened and jerked away.

"Keep your hands to yourself, you oozy slob!" she spat at him.

Almost casually he slapped her across the face. It was not a hard slap, and she was more astonished than hurt. She gazed at him with her mouth open.

"Ya'all'll learn we don't take no sass off junkies around here," he told her mildly. "Now turn around, and I'll take them cuffs off you."

After staring at him for some moments more, she turned her back. He keyed open the cuffs and returned them to his belt.

The lean deputy, who had returned from the cell block, was looking her up and down carefully, his face still expressionless, but with lewd hunger showing in his eyes.

"Want me to stay here tonight?" he asked the sheriff.

Burton Clint gave him an irritated look. "She ain't been checked out yet. You go roust out Cousin Maud and get her fat ass over here."

Somewhat sullenly the deputy went outdoors. The sheriff steered Elizabeth to the cell block and locked her into the cell where Crowder had put her gear.

"Sleep tight," he said, smiling at her through the bars.

"May I call a lawyer?"

"No lawyers in Rustic Pines," the sheriff said. "'Cept Judge Newley, and he don't practice, 'cause he sits on the district court."

"There must be lawyers somewhere in the county."

"All be in bed now," Sheriff Clint said. "You can see a lawyer in the morning."

"Just a minute!" she said peremptorily. "Why are you jailing me in this little town? You must have a main jail at the parish seat."

The sheriff had started to walk away, but he stopped and turned. "Judge Newley's court is here," he explained. "You're gonna be tried before him."

"Why?"

"Because he's my cousin," the sheriff said, and continued on out.

Elizabeth looked around her cell. It was only about six feet by nine feet, with a double bunk, a sink, and a toilet bowl. By the amount of dust on everything, she guessed it wasn't often used. Light was furnished by a glaring one-hundred-fifty-watt bulb hanging from the hallway ceiling. She wondered if it was going to be left on all night.

In lieu of mattresses the twin bunkers were covered with soiled cotton-stuffed pads only about an inch thick. Close examination showed no bedbugs. She turned over the one on the lower bunk and spread her sleeping bag on it.

The sheriff returned with an enormously fat, rather stupid-looking woman wearing a tentlike caftan. "This here's my cousin, Maud Crowder," he introduced. "She'll be in the livin' quarters tonight, case you need anything. But don't bother her less'n you have to. Okay?"

Elizabeth said, "How do you do, Maud?"

Gazing at her stupidly, the woman said nothing.

Both the sheriff and Maud Crowder went away. Elizabeth saw Sheriff Clint leave the building. Presumably the woman entered the living quarters.

Removing her boots and her jacket, but nothing else, Elizabeth climbed into the sleeping bag. She lay gazing at the bright light in the hallway for a few moments.

"Maud!" she yelled finally.

A few more moments passed before the fat woman

appeared. She gazed through the bars at Elizabeth without expression.

"Will you turn out the light, please?" Elizabeth asked.

The woman flicked a wall switch and the light went out. There was still enough light coming through the hall door from the office to see, however.

Elizabeth said, "The sheriff introduced you as his cousin. He also said the judge who is going to hear my case is his cousin. And his deputy has the same last name as you, so I assume he's the sheriff's cousin, too. Is everyone around here his cousin?"

"Nope," she said. "Some is related closer."

She went out, switched off the light in the office, and Elizabeth heard the door into the living quarters close.

Elizabeth lay in the dark thinking about her predicament for a long time. Obviously she had been caught up in some kind of racket, but she couldn't figure out just what kind. She assumed a heavy fine would be levied against her, but she didn't understand how they expected to collect. She had only a few dollars with her, and no checkbook. And the minute they released her and she got back to New Orleans, she intended to hire a lawyer to fight whatever fine she was given. Furthermore, she intended to file a formal complaint about the way she had been treated with the state's attorney general.

She was about to go to sleep on that thought when she remembered the peculiar remark Sheriff Clint had made in response to his deputy's question about sleeping at the substation tonight. From the way Sam Crowder had looked her over, it had been apparent to Elizabeth, and no doubt to the sheriff also, what plans he had for her if left alone in the building with her.

The sheriff had said, "She ain't been checked out yet," the implication being that if she had been, and had passed whatever checkout requirements were, the sheriff would have had no objection to the prisoner being sexually assaulted by his deputy.

Then she remembered the questions Burton Clint had asked her on the island before her arrest. He had mentioned arrest only after discovering she had no husband, parents, boy friend, or fiancé. She wondered if perhaps he would never have mentioned it if he had discovered someone close was going to be inquiring after her if she didn't show up for a time.

A cold chill ran along her spine. Perhaps she was facing something far more serious than merely a heavy fine.

Two

The chief deputy was seated in the police car, waiting, when Sheriff Clint came from the substation after taking Maud Crowder inside. Instead of getting into the car, the sheriff rounded to the driver's side and peered in at the driver.

"Guess we'll call it a night, Sam," he said. "I'm kinda beat, so think I'll turn in. You mind runnin' the car back to headquarters by yourself?"

"Naw, Burt. See you in the morning."

"No, you won't. You're goin' to New Orleans."

"Oh?"

"This Hunter gal looks like too good a catch to take any chances on. I want you to check her out personal."

"Okay, but it may take a while."

"Not if you get on it early in the mornin'. I'll hold off her case until afternoon. You phone me from New Orleans soon as you get her checked out."

"All right, Burt," Crowder said. "Maybe I'll run down tonight and rent me a motel, so I can get an early start."

"Good idea. Earlier the better. Whyn't you stop and pack an overnight bag, so you can take off soon as you turn in the car?"

"Yeah," Crowder said. "Good night."

"Night, Sam."

The sheriff crossed the road to the house where he lived. Sam Crowder drove a few yards to park in front of another house, went inside, and came out a few minutes later carrying an overnight bag. Tossing it in the trunk, he headed for the parish seat to turn in the police car and pick up his own car.

Elizabeth Hunter awakened at six A.M. As it was midsummer, it was already light by then. Stripping, she had a cold-water bath of sorts in the cell's sink, put on clean underwear and socks, then dressed in her jeans, boots, and flannel shirt.

About seven-thirty Maud Crowder brought a breakfast of cooked oatmeal, toast, and coffee. She picked up the dishes again at eight, then Elizabeth saw no more of her until she brought a lunch of soup, bread, and coffee at noon.

"When am I going to get to appear in court?" Elizabeth asked the woman.

Shrugging, Maud walked away.

At about that same time Sheriff Burton Clint was having lunch at his desk at the parish seat when his chief deputy phoned from New Orleans.

"She checks out fine, Burt," Sam Crowder said. "Only been in New Orleans about four months. Came here from Los Angeles after a breakup with a boy friend. Been working as a dress model in a local department store. According to a girl who works with her, she has no close friends. Only living relative is a younger sister in L.A. that she's on the outs with. Nobody's gonna come checking on her."

"Good work, Sam," the sheriff said. "See you when you get back."

When he hung up, the sheriff finished his lunch, then made several phone calls, then headed for Rustic Pines.

Elizabeth was becoming resigned to sitting in her cell indefinitely when Sheriff Clint finally showed up about one P.M. Unlocking the cell door, he looked her over approvingly.

"Even in them old clothes you're a good-lookin' gal, Miss Hunter," he said. "You'll make a fine impression in court."

"Why, thank you, Sheriff," she said dryly. "You mean I'm finally going to get to court?"

"At the afternoon session, which starts at two P.M. Meantime, somebody over at the courtroom you'll be glad to meet."

He took her across the street to the long building containing both the general store and the district court. They entered the courtroom door.

It was a small courtroom only about twenty feet wide by thirty long. At one end, divided from the spectator section by a wooden railing, was the judge's bench, the court clerk's desk, the witness stand, a couple of counsel tables, and a jury box. There were seats in the spectator section for only about two dozen people.

The only person in the courtroom was a tall, gangling man of middle age in a blue serge suit, seated at the defendant's table. He rose to his feet when Elizabeth and the sheriff entered. The sheriff introduced the man as Jonathan Newley, and told her he was her court-appointed lawyer.

"I didn't ask for a court-appointed lawyer," Elizabeth said. "No offense, Mr. Newley, but I'd prefer to phone some lawyer in New Orleans."

"Be a mistake," the lawyer drawled laconically.

"Why?" Elizabeth asked with raised brows.

"The judge hates city-slicker lawyers," the sheriff explained. "Probably throw the book at you jes' for bringin' one in."

"I still prefer to choose my own lawyer," Elizabeth said. "May I use a phone?"

"No."

She gazed at the sheriff in silence for a time. Even-

tually she said, "You're deliberately denying me my rights."

"No sech thing," he disclaimed. "Supreme Court said you're entitled to legal counsel. Didn't say you're entitled to pick any damn lawyer you please. You got legal counsel."

There was no way she was going to get to a phone, Elizabeth realized. After gazing at the sheriff for another few seconds, she gave up.

"All right," she said resignedly. "But at least I'm entitled to confer with my lawyer in private."

"Sure," Sheriff Clint said agreeably.

Pushing through the swinging gate in the wooden railing, he took a seat in the spectator section.

Elizabeth seated herself at the defense table, and the lawyer sat also. She examined him dubiously. He had a thin, high-cheekboned, weatherbeaten face and a large Adam's apple. He looked more like a farmer dressed for church than a lawyer.

"I assume you're a member of the bar, Mr. Newley," she said.

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "Of course. Why do you ask that?"

"Last night the sheriff said there weren't any lawyers in Rustic Pines."

"Oh. Well, that's true. I live and practice over at the parish seat. I was called over special for this case."

After studying him for a time more, Elizabeth said, "This is a frame-up, Counselor. Deputy Sheriff Sam Crowder planted that heroin in my musette bag."

The lawyer said with polite disbelief, "Sam has a pretty good reputation around here, Miss Hunter. Can you prove that charge?"

"How could I prove it?" she asked frustratedly. "It's my word against his."

"Yes, and the court is naturally inclined to believe the testimony of a police officer against an accused felon. I'm afraid Judge Newley would give no credence to your charge."

"Judge Newley!" Elizabeth said, suddenly realizing

why the lawyer's name had seemed familiar. "That's your name, too."

"Of course," he said. "He's my brother."

After staring at him for a long time, Elizabeth asked, "Is that legal?"

"Quite," he assured her. "It could hardly be prejudicial for the defense counsel to have a close relationship with the court. If anything, it's an advantage to the defense."

Elizabeth rather doubted that. It all seemed too cozy. But before she could say anything more, they were interrupted by a short, stocky, sharply dressed man carrying a briefcase who came breezing into the courtroom.

"Hello, Nathan," Elizabeth's lawyer said cordially as the man stopped at their table. "Miss Hunter, this is Deputy District Attorney Nathan Clint."

The man gave her a smiling bow. Elizabeth stared at him.

"Clint," she said. "The sheriff's brother?"

"No, just a cousin," the prosecutor said.

He went over to the other table, opened his briefcase, and took out two items. They were Elizabeth's hunting knife and the plastic bag of white powder Sam Crowder had pretended to find in her musette bag.

Indicating the two items, Nathan Clint said with a wide smile at his colleague, "Evidence, Johathan. Gonna be hard to beat."

"May we have a pretrial conference, Nathan?" Elizabeth's lawyer asked.

"Sure, come on over."

Excusing himself, Jonathan Newley went over to the other table. The two lawyers sat talking in low voices for some time. Finally Newley rose and returned to reseat himself with Elizabeth.

"He's willing to accept a plea bargain," he said.

"What's that mean?"

"The sheriff filed an information charging you with illegal camping, creating a fire hazard, possession of heroin for sale, resisting arrest, and assault with a

deadly weapon on a police officer. You could get twenty years for all that."

In a high voice Elizabeth said, "It's all a frame-up. There are no signs out there saying camping and fires are illegal. And what's he mean, possession of heroin for sale? Even if it was my dope, which it wasn't, I wouldn't be guilty of anything but simple possession."

"If you have over a certain amount, the law assumes you have it for purposes of selling," the lawyer explained. "You were over that amount."

"That's silly," Elizabeth protested. "As for those other charges, I didn't assault anybody. All I did was pull a knife in self-defense."

"Against a police officer trying to arrest you?" Newley asked with raised brows. "Come now, Miss Hunter."

"Well, maybe I made one little mistake in judgment," Elizabeth conceded. "But they'd just planted heroin on me, and I was mad. It's nothing to draw twenty years for."

"You could get it," the lawyer assured her. "But, as I say, Clint is willing to accept a plea bargain. He'll drop all other charges if you'll plead guilty to the reduced charge of simple possession of heroin."

"But I'm not guilty!"

"Two police officers are going to testify that you are. And you've admitted yourself that you're guilty of ADW. You don't have to actually stab anyone to be guilty of that, you know. The threat is enough. Clint is willing to recommend probation if you go along."

"Probation?" Elizabeth said. "Nothing else? No fine?"

"Nothing else. My advice is to accept the deal."

Elizabeth gave a hopeless shrug. "What choice do I have?"

"You're making the right one," the lawyer assured her. "Now, when your case is called, Clint and I will approach the bench to explain the plea bargain. Then the judge will ask you to rise and state your name and

will explain the charge, and will ask you how you plead. You just say, ‘Guilty,’ and it’s all over.”

“All right,” Elizabeth agreed.

Shortly thereafter a court clerk appeared, and shortly after that the judge arrived. One or two spectators also drifted in.

Judge Gordon Newley was older than his brother, about sixty, but had the same rangy build, thin face, and large Adam’s apple. When the clerk called Elizabeth’s case, which seemed to be the only one on the docket, the two attorneys approached the bench and had a brief conversation with the judge.

The judge looked over at Elizabeth and said, “Will the defendant please rise.”

When Elizabeth came to her feet, the judge said, “State your name and place of residence.”

“Elizabeth Hunter, New Orleans.”

“Miss Hunter, the prosecution has withdrawn all charges against you except possession of heroin for sale, and has reduced that to one count of simple illegal possession of heroin. How do you plead?”

“Guilty,” Elizabeth said in a low voice.

“Your guilty plea is accepted,” Judge Newley said. “I hereby sentence you to serve one year at hard labor at the Pine Parish Prison Farm for Women.”

Elizabeth gazed at the man with her mouth open. Then she turned her outraged gaze on her court-appointed lawyer.

He gave a rueful shrug.

Three

Elizabeth was delivered to the Pine Parish Prison Farm, handcuffed, in the sheriff's car, with Sam Crowder driving and the sheriff in the back seat with her. About ten miles from Rustic Pines, the nearest town, it was surrounded by woods on three sides and by a swamp on the other.

Originally the prison had been a World War II basic training camp for the army. The wooden barracks were still in use, and it had been converted to a prison simply by erecting a twelve-foot-high chain-link fence around it, topped by two strands of barbed wire slanting at an inward angle.

Crowder halted the police car at the prison gate. The sheriff got out and went over to show the armed guard inside the gate Elizabeth's admittance papers. The guard unlocked the gate, the sheriff climbed back into the car, and Crowder drove on through.

They parked in front of a building with a sign over its front door reading ADMINISTRATION. Getting out, the sheriff ordered Elizabeth out, removed her handcuffs, and escorted her into the building.

They entered a large room with a counter running its width from wall to wall. Behind it were two desks, and beyond them was a floor-to-ceiling chain-link grille behind which was a long row of lockers and a door lettered SHOWER ROOM.

Behind one of the desks sat a burly, masculine-looking woman in her thirties wearing a tan uniform consisting of an Eisenhower jacket and slacks. At the

other desk sat a busty, more feminine-looking woman of about the same age in a skirt and slacks.

Rising, the burly woman came over to the counter.

"Got a live one for you, Maxine," Sheriff Clint said, shoving the papers across the counter to her.

After scanning the papers, Maxine looked Elizabeth over with interest. "So we're going to have you for a whole year, huh, cutie?"

Swinging open a hinged section of the counter, she motioned Elizabeth to come through. She swung the section back into place after Elizabeth was inside, then steered Elizabeth over to the gate in the chain-link grille.

"Buzz me," she said over her shoulder to the civilian clerk.

The woman pressed a button on her desk, there was a buzzing sound as the electronic lock disengaged, and Maxine pushed open the gate. She pushed Elizabeth inside, followed her in, and clicked the gate closed behind her.

Taking a master key from her pocket, Maxine unlocked one of the lockers and pulled open the door. "Put your clothes and personal possessions in here," she said. "You'll get 'em back a year from now."

"All my clothes?" Elizabeth asked, glancing toward the sheriff, who still stood at the counter.

"Every last stitch, cutie."

"In front of him?" Elizabeth asked indignantly.

The sheriff called, "Warden in, Maxine?"

"Yeah, Sheriff," Maxine called back. "Go on in."

The sheriff disappeared through a door to the right of the room. Maxine said, "Okay, Miss Modesty. Now get 'em off."

When she was nude, Elizabeth was escorted to the shower room, where she was told by Maxine to shower and shampoo, then was subjected to the indignity of having her head and crotch sprayed for lice. After that Maxine led her, still nude, to a clothing room, where she was given three pairs of cotton panties and three bras, three pairs of cotton sox, two shapeless

tan smocks, two work uniforms consisting of blue jeans and blue work shirts, a pair of sneakers, and a pair of heavy work shoes.

Maxine instructed her to dress in one of the smocks and the sneakers. Then she led her, carrying the other clothing, back out to the office, where the civilian clerk buzzed them through the gate again.

Lifting the phone on her desk, Maxine dialed a number, then said into the phone, "Send over the live-in guard from barracks ten to show a new inmate her bunk."

Sheriff Clint found Warden Velma Sorenson alone in her office. The warden was a middle-aged but still attractive woman with jet-black hair framing a thin, still face with sharply chiseled features. She wore a conservative but expensive-looking white pantsuit.

Removing his Stetson, the sheriff sank into a chair before the desk. "Brought you a real live one just now," he said. "Twenty-three, built like a model—matter of fact, she was one—pretty face, and no friends or relatives to give a damn about her. Name's Elizabeth Hunter."

"Offense?" the warden asked.

The sheriff grinned. "She pleaded guilty to possession of heroin before Judge Newley."

Velma Sorenson smiled slightly. "No actual criminal record?"

"Nope."

"Then she'll probably need some conditioning before she agrees to work at the house. I'll turn Karl Stern loose on her."

"Better let her dig potatoes for a couple of weeks first," Sheriff Clint advised. "Then she'll more likely see the advantages of the house."

"Yes, of course I'll do that," the warden said. "Hard labor is a great convincer."

Elizabeth was assigned to a barracks with twenty-three other women varying in age from their early

twenties into their fifties. Every morning she was loaded into a truck with fifteen other women and was driven under guard to a potato field outside the fence, where they spent all day digging potatoes, with an hour break for lunch. Their chief guard was a large, heavily muscled, coarse-featured man name Karl Stern. There were also a couple of female guards, but Stern, who carried a rifle, was the only one armed.

At night Elizabeth had a shower right after dinner, then fell into bed exhausted.

Most of the other women in her barracks struck her as hardened and vulgar, and she made no friends. She became aware through overheard conversation that the eight women who weren't on the potato-digging detail were envied for their easier jobs, however. Three worked in the laundry, three in the kitchen, and two young and attractive girls who seemed to have special privileges and no particular duties were jealously whispered about as working "up at the house."

Just after dinner on the Monday beginning her third week, Elizabeth was called into the private room at the front of her barracks where the barracks guard slept. The guard was a strapping blonde amazon of about forty whom Elizabeth knew only as Fran. Seating herself on her bunk, the guard invited Elizabeth to take a chair. Obediently Elizabeth sat.

"Getting tired of hoeing potatoes?" Fran inquired solicitously.

"Yes," Elizabeth admitted.

"Like an easier job?"

The tone in which the question was asked made Elizabeth wary. "Such as?" she inquired.

"The warden gives a lot of parties, and she likes pretty girls to help entertain the guests. You only have to work a few hours a night, you get to wear pretty clothes at the parties, and you're relieved of all other duties."

"Where does she give these parties?" Elizabeth asked.

"At her house, a couple of miles from here."

After thinking this over, Elizabeth asked, "Who are her guests?"

"Different people," Fran said vaguely.

"Married couples?"

"No, mainly men."

"Just mainly?" Elizabeth persisted.

"Well, all men," Fran amended.

Elizabeth gazed at her steadily. "Warden Sorenson's running a cathouse?"

"No, she's not running a cathouse," Fran snapped at her. "She just likes to entertain. There's not a girl in your barracks who wouldn't jump at the chance I'm offering you. You prefer to keep digging potatoes?"

"I prefer to keep digging potatoes," Elizabeth confirmed.

The big blonde gave her a grim smile. "You're making it rough on yourself, sweet cakes. You'll end up there anyway. Why don't you do it the easy way?"

"I'm awfully tired," Elizabeth said. "May I go take my shower now and go to bed?"

"No, you may not," Fran said, getting to her feet. "Come with me."

She led Elizabeth from the barracks and across to the administration building. A young woman in uniform was on night duty in the admissions office. Fran had her buzz the electronic lock and took Elizabeth to the shower room.

"You can take your shower here," Fran said. "Get your clothes off."

"Why here?" Elizabeth asked suspiciously. "What's the matter with the showers in the barracks?"

"If I jerk your clothes off you, you're not going to enjoy it, sweet cakes," Fran said. "Want it that way?"

"No, thanks," Elizabeth said, and began to undress.

Fran waited until Elizabeth was under the shower, then said, "This is where you'll take your shower every night from now on until you decide you'd like to work up at the house. Enjoy yourself." She walked away.

As she soaped herself, Elizabeth wondered what Fran had meant by that. Like the facility at the barracks, the shower room was large and there were six shower heads. As this was the first time she had been able to enjoy a shower alone since she arrived here, Fran's threat hardly impressed her.

She luxuriated in the shower for some time. Finally she turned it off and stepped from the stall, still wet, to reach for one of the towels piled on a counter just outside the stall.

She came to a shocked halt. Karl Stern was standing there grinning at her.

Four

Elizabeth grabbed up one of the towels, but Stern jerked it from her hand, tossed it aside, and pulled her against him. Instinctively she brought up a knee, but he twisted aside.

"Oh, you like to fight, huh?" he growled, and smashed a fist into her ribs.

When she gasped and reeled backward, he drove his other fist into her other side. Then he methodically beat her into semiconsciousness, laughing with enjoyment each time his powerful fists smashed into her body. She didn't remember falling, but she was aware of lying on the floor, wracked with pain, and of him dropping alongside her and pulling her against him. Then she passed out.

She awoke lying on a hospital cot, with the light of dawn coming through the window. Painfully sitting up, she glanced around and saw that she was in the prison infirmary, at the rear of the administration

building. She looked down and saw that she wore nothing but a hospital gown. Every bone and muscle in her body ached and she was sure she was covered by bruises. But after moving her arms and legs and probing other parts of her body, she decided nothing was broken.

Sliding from the cot, she moved stiffly over to the door. It was locked. She checked the window. It was open, but the screen was nailed in from the outside.

She looked for something with which to cut the screen, and found a scalpel in a sterilizer. But before using it, she looked for her clothing. She had been wearing one of the shapeless smocks and her sneakers when Fran led her from the barracks to the administration building, and she found them in a closet. After dressing, she cut the screen from the window.

She carefully studied the area between the infirmary and the nearest fence before climbing through the window. The reason there were no bars on the windows of this prison was that the grounds were patrolled by huge Doberman pinschers between lights-out and five in the morning, and the dogs were trained to attack anyone but their trainers. The administration considered the dogs, plus the twelve-foot chain-link fence topped by barbed wire, sufficient security measures to discourage escape attempts.

A wall clock showed a quarter to five, which meant the dogs were still out there. None were in sight, though. Elizabeth quietly let herself out the window and began to tiptoe toward the fence, some twenty yards away.

Halfway there she heard the deep-throated bark of one of the dogs, immediately followed by two others joining in. Breaking into a run, she made the last ten yards in no more than a second. She leaped high, got a double handgrip, and dug her toes into a couple of the narrow diamond-shaped holes made by the crossing wires.

In school Elizabeth had been on the gym team. She scrambled upward like a monkey, gripped the steel

pipe that topped the fence, and leaned far backward with her arms straight out to walk her feet upward out of the range of the dogs' fangs just as the first one hit the fence. His fangs ripped a section from the hem of her hanging smock.

As the other dogs leaped upward, snarling and snapping at the hanging cloth, she reached up her right hand to grip the top strand of barbed wire between two barbs, pulled it downward to grip the lower wire also, and forced both down onto the steel pipe topping the fence. With her left hand she repeated the performance two feet from her right hand, so that for a two-foot section the barbed wire was flattened against the steel pipe. Then she walked upward until both feet were pressed against the top bar and swung herself erect to balance in a stooped position atop the fence. She lifted both feet, experiencing slight difficulty because barbs were embedded in the rubber soles, momentarily balanced on her hands, then thrust herself outward and released her double grip on the pipe and wires. As she fell feet first, the two wires sprang back into place with a twang.

She landed with practiced grace, but her left foot struck a stone, badly twisting her ankle and throwing her to the ground. Instantly she was up again and limping toward the edge of the nearby woods. A siren began to wail just as she reached the trees.

She had gone only a few yards when she realized her ankle was twisted too badly for her to make any speed. There would be dogs after her soon, she knew, and they would track her down long before she could reach a main road and hitchhike a ride. Her only immediate chance was to throw off the scent by getting to water.

Then she felt behind her and realized she was going to have a problem even if she managed eventually to get to a main road. The whole rear of her smock had been ripped out by the dogs.

Spotting a stick about two and a half feet long,

Elizabeth picked it up to use as a cane and hobbled in the direction of the swamp.

At ten o'clock that morning one of the two phones on Warden Sorenson's desk rang. It was Maxine, calling from the admissions office.

She said, "Warden, I just got a call from the gate that Elizabeth Hunter's younger sister is here, demanding to see her."

"Her sister!" the warden said sharply. "Sheriff Clint said she didn't have any relatives."

"Well, she's got at least one. The gate guard asked for identification, and she showed him a driver's license. Her name's Christine Hunter, she's twenty-one years old, and she's from Los Angeles. What shall I tell her?"

After thinking for a moment, the warden said, "Tell her the truth, that her sister escaped early this morning. Tell her to leave a number we can call, and we'll inform her as soon as the prisoner is recaptured."

"Think that'll satisfy her?" Maxine asked dubiously. "The gate guard says she's pretty insistent."

"What can she do? Her sister isn't here to see."

"Seems like we're only postponing the problem," Maxine said. "She'll be back again after we recapture Hunter."

"Don't worry about it," the warden said. "Just do as I say."

Hanging up, Warden Sorenson picked up the other phone, which was a direct line not going through the switchboard, and called the sheriff's office.

When she got Sheriff Clint on the phone, she said accusingly, "A sister of Elizabeth Hunter's just showed up here. You told me she had no relatives."

After a period of silence, the sheriff said, "I knew she had a sister, but they were supposed to have nothing to do with each other. What'd you tell her?"

"The truth, that she couldn't see her sister because she'd escaped. Have you had any word on Hunter?"

"No, but she has to be still in the area. I've got

every possible route out covered. I think she must have took to the swamp."

"What I've been thinking, too," the warden said. "Otherwise the dogs would have picked up her scent. How soon can you get over here?"

"Twenty minutes, if it's necessary."

"It is," she assured him. "And bring along Sam Crowder with you."

Hanging up, she used the other phone to call back the admissions office. When Maxine answered, she asked, "Is Karl Stern out in the field?"

"Yes, of course," Maxine said. "He's out every morning."

"Send another guard to relieve him," the warden ordered. "And have him report to me."

The big guard appeared only moments before Sheriff Clint and Sam Crowder arrived. Warden Sorenson didn't invite any of them to sit, because she considered what she had to say too urgent.

"Sheriff, there's only one way to handle this," she said without preliminary. "If Hunter talks to her sister, we're in trouble."

"So what do you suggest?"

"I want you to withdraw all your men from the search team and post them along roads that might be possible escape routes. Then I want just you three to take the dogs and go into the swamp after her."

"And if we find her?"

"Bury her where no one else ever will."

Elizabeth waded ashore from a narrow creek she had been following for a quarter mile and sat on the bank, exhausted. Examining her ankle, she saw that it was swollen to twice its normal size.

Off in the distance she heard the deep-throated baying of dogs. She listened, too tired to move, as the baying came steadily closer.

How could they follow her scent in the water, she wondered? They couldn't, she decided. They must

have followed it to the point where she entered the creek, then were merely following the creek bank.

Struggling to her feet, she hobbled on her makeshift cane away from the creek. The sound of the dogs came closer. She reached the bank of a bayou and forded it to a tiny ait that was a dot in the water no more than a dozen feet across, covered with reedlike grass a foot and a half high.

She huddled down on her side in the grass in the middle of the little island.

The baying grew progressively louder. Then the dogs were sniffling and growling at the edge of the bayou, only yards away from her.

Elizabeth heard feet sloshing through the water in her direction. She experienced momentary hope when she heard Sheriff Clint's angry voice say, "She's not over there, boy. We're wastin' time."

The hope died when Karl Stern's voice said, "Them dogs don't lie, Sheriff. She's in here, all right."

Then a shadow fell across her and she looked up fearfully. Karl Stern, standing over her, was grinning down crookedly.

Aiming his rifle at her head, he fired from a distance of four inches.

Five

A speedboat zipped through the water of the bay, pulling behind it on water skis a shapely girl in a red swimsuit. At the controls was a muscular man of about thirty in swim trunks.

Over the roar of the engine a loud buzz sounded.

Lifting the ship-to-shore phone from its hook, the muscular man said, "Sheba Two."

After listening for a moment, he cut the engine and held the phone high. The girl on water skis had just time to see the gesture before the suddenly slack line dumped her into the water. She came up sputtering and swam toward the boat, pushing the skis ahead of her.

The man reeled in the line and lifted the skis from the water as the girl climbed aboard over the stern. She pulled off her swimming cap to allow a mass of curling ash-blonde hair to cascade about her shoulders. She was a beautiful woman, with classically formed features and a perfectly proportioned body.

"Thanks for the warning," she said.

Grinning at her, the man handed her the phone. "Your boss. You said if he phoned, to drop everything and call you."

Taking the phone, Jill Munroe said, "Charlie, you got me dunked in the water by calling just now."

"I imagine it was a graceful splash, angel," a cultured voice said in her ear. "Time to go to work."

"Charlie, I'm clear up at Malibu."

"I understand your new boy friend has a fast boat, angel," Charlie Townsend said. "I'll give you an hour."

"All right, Charlie," she said resignedly. "I'll dress en route back."

In Beverly Hills, Sabrina Duncan hurried from the parking lot to the front door of the Brown Derby, fifteen minutes late for her luncheon date. She was a lovely, clear-eyed brunette with a subtle air of breeding about her, dressed in a chic tailored suit. A maitre d' appeared the moment she entered.

"Mr. Duncan here yet?" she asked.

"No, madame, but his table is ready. Right this way, please."

He led her to a table for two against the wall and

held a chair for her. "Would you like a cocktail while you are waiting?" he asked.

"Thanks, but I'll wait for Mr. Duncan."

As the maitre d' moved away, a tall, good-looking man in his thirties came in, glanced around, then came over to the table.

"Hi, bright eyes," he said, smiling at her.

As he seated himself, Sabrina said, "Know why I divorced you, Bill Duncan? Because you always kept me waiting fifteen minutes."

"Know why I let you?" he countered. "Because you tell little fibs. I was parking across the street when I saw you come in."

They smiled at each other. "How have you been?" he asked.

"Getting lazy. Charlie hasn't called in three weeks. How's the LAPD?"

"Same old grind."

A waiter appeared and they ordered cocktails. As the waiter moved away, the maitre d' came over carrying a telephone and plugged it into a phone jack in the wall.

Setting the phone in front of Sabrina, he said, "For you, Miss Duncan."

Lifting the phone, she said into it, "Yes?"

A familiar voice said in her ear, "Time to go to work, angel."

"Charlie, you pick the strangest times," she said. "We've just ordered cocktails, and haven't ordered lunch yet."

"It's going to take Jill an hour," Charlie Townsend said. "So take your time. You're only about five minutes away."

"You're an angel too, Charlie," she said gratefully. "See you in an hour."

"See me?"

"Well, hear you," she amended. "We've given up ever seeing you. Except for Jill. She still has hopes."

Kelly Garrett was wheeling her Cobra along the

Pacific Coast Highway toward Laguna Beach. She was a slim, earthily beautiful girl with dancing eyes, dark brown hair, and soft features. She was dressed in tennis shorts and a halter, and a tennis racket lay on the seat beside her.

The car phone rang. She picked it up and said, "Hello?"

The cultured voice of Charles Townsend said, "Time to go to work, angel."

"Charlie!" she wailed. "I'm on my way to the Laguna Beach Tennis Tournament. I paid a twenty-five-dollar entry fee."

"Put it on your expense account, angel."

"All right, Charlie," she said with resignation. "When?"

"One hour."

"I'll be there," Kelly said.

Hanging up the phone, she slowed, pulled over on the shoulder, checked the side-view mirror, and made a U-turn.

The three beautiful women known as Charlie's Angels were all graduates of the Los Angeles Police Academy. But none of them had spent much time as policewomen. They had graduated together, and were still brand-new recruits when they were individually approached by a man named John Bosley, who made each the identical and unrefusale offer.

John Bosley was a cheerful, round-faced man of fifty with a full head of dark hair, neatly parted and worn moderately short. His proposition was that the girls resign from the LAPD to work for a private investigator named Charles Townsend. Their jobs would require only periodic duty, with more time off than work, but they would have to be available for immediate call to duty at all times. Each would be furnished a phone attachment on which she would be required to tape-record exactly where she could be reached every time she left home. Bosley told them that while the work might be dangerous at times, it would never

be in support of any criminal activity, because Charles Townsend screened his clients carefully, and would not accept assignments from anyone whose moral and ethical principles were suspect. They would never meet their employer personally, although they would often talk to him on the phone. Their contacts would always be through Bosley.

The inducement that made this strange proposition unrefusuable was the salary, which was considerably higher than they could ever expect to earn as police-women. An additional inducement was that all three were asked. At Police Academy they had become good friends, and none of them would have made the change if the other two had not been asked. The three of them talked it over and decided to accept.

In a quiet section of Beverly Hills there was a square two-story building with a bronze plaque just to the right of the high, brass-bound oaken double doors. The plaque read simply TOWNSEND INVESTIGATION. There was no other indication that this was the central headquarters of the highest-priced private investigator in the greater Los Angeles area.

Inside there was a high-ceilinged entry hall with stairs opposite the front door leading to the second floor. Off the left side of the entry hall there was a sliding door, almost always open, leading into the administrative office. The office was large, thickly carpeted, and expensively furnished. Although there was a desk with a telephone and a microphone-and-squawkbox attachment on it, it looked more like a drawing room than an office. There was a sofa, several overstuffed chairs, a large cocktail table, and a built-in bar. A number of original oils by famous artists hung on the walls.

John Bosley sat behind the desk. Blonde Jill Munroe, now wearing a flowered red and white dress, sat in one of the easy chairs. Sabrina Duncan leaned against the bar. Kelly Garrett, still in her tennis outfit, sat on the sofa next to a slim, rather pretty girl of about twenty-one who was dressed in a white skirt and

sweater. Bosley had introduced her as Christine Hunter. They were all waiting for Charlie Townsend to phone.

Bosley said, "Sabrina, since you're already up, will you close the door?"

Sabrina went across to slide closed the door, then returned to her place at the bar. The phone rang.

Lifting the phone from its cradle, Bosley switched on the microphone-and-squawkbox attachment and pressed several buttons on his desk. Steel shutters slid over the windows, darkening the room. A screen slid down from a slot in the ceiling and a projection machine clicked on. A slide of an attractive, smiling girl in her early twenties appeared on the screen.

Bosley said, "All set, sir."

The voice of Charlie Townsend said from the squawkbox, "This is Elizabeth Hunter, angels, the older sister of the young lady you just met. I will let Christine start things off."

Emitting a sigh, Christine said, "Elizabeth and I had a falling out about six months ago. It wasn't my fault. Her boy friend decided he liked me better, and told her so. I had done nothing to encourage him, and refused to go out with him after he and Elizabeth broke up. But she blamed me. She said some terrible things, told me she never wanted to see me again, and disappeared. I was heartbroken about it, because we had always been very close."

Kelly said with sympathy, "Men can make women do strange things."

Christine said, "I heard nothing from her or of her until about a month ago, when I received a letter from a woman in New Orleans named Gayle Pournelle. She said she was the head of the women's fashion department in a department store named Whitloff's, and that Elizabeth had worked for her as a dress model. She got my name and address from Elizabeth's employment application, where she had listed me as next of kin. She said she thought I ought to know about the matter in the news clipping she was enclosing."

"What did the clipping say?" Jill asked.

"That Elizabeth Hunter, age twenty-three, of New Orleans, had pleaded guilty to possession of heroin in Pine Parish, which is about a hundred miles from New Orleans, and had been sentenced by District Judge Gordon Newley to one year of hard labor at the Pine Parish Prison Farm for Women."

Bosley pressed a button and the full-length photograph of a tall, gangling man of about sixty with a prominent Adam's apple appeared on the screen. He was wearing a black judicial robe.

"Judge Gordon Newley of District Court Thirteen," Charlie's voice said. "District Court Thirteen is at Rustic Pines, Louisiana, population thirty."

Bosley pressed the button again and a heavyset, wide-jowled man wearing a tan uniform and a Stetson appeared on the screen.

"Sheriff Burton Clint," Charlie's voice said. "He and his chief deputy, Sam Crowder, made the arrest. Bosley?"

Bosley pressed the button and a lean, muscular man with an expressionless face, wearing the same kind of uniform, appeared on the screen. Charlie's voice said, "Chief Deputy Sam Crowder."

Bosley switched off the machine, made the screen retract into the ceiling, and caused the shutters to open and let in daylight.

Sabrina asked, "Was it a legal bust, Christine?"

"According to the sheriff it was. I visited his office and demanded to see the arrest record. That was after an unsuccessful visit I made to the prison, but I'll get to that in a minute. According to the arrest record, Elizabeth was originally questioned because she was illegally camping in an area designated as a parish park. A routine search turned up the heroin in her knapsack."

"What was she doing, camping there?" Kelly asked.

"She's always been a backpacking and camping enthusiast. I assume she simply didn't know she was in a

restricted area. Or maybe the sheriff was lying about that, too. He lied about everything else.”

“How do you know?” Kelly asked.

“My sister never went near drugs in her life. And I don’t believe she ever pleaded guilty. I think she was railroaded into prison.”

Jill said, “This strikes me as something you need a good lawyer for more than you need us.”

Christine shook her head. “I need you to find her.”

Sabrina said, “But you said she was in prison.”

“I said she was sentenced to prison. When I tried to visit her, they told me she had escaped. But the woman in the admissions office was so upset by my appearance, I felt they were covering up something. She acted as though she had never expected anyone to check up on Elizabeth.”

Jill asked, “Are you saying she may not have escaped?”

“I’m positive they lied about it. If she had gotten out of that place, I think she would have headed straight for a lawyer. But according to both the prison administration and the sheriff’s office, she is still at large.”

Kelly asked, “What about appealing to the governor or the state attorney general?”

“I did. They’re reluctant to interfere in local affairs unless there’s definite proof of wrongdoing. And I have no evidence.” She reached over to grip Kelly’s hand. “Please, I need your help.”

Coming to his feet, Bosley said, “We’ll do our best, Miss Hunter. And now, if you’ll let me see you out, the girls can get stared immediately.”

“Yes,” Christine said, rising also. “Yes, of course.” She glanced around at all three angels with a timid smile. “Thank you.”

“Don’t worry, Christine,” Jill said gently. “We’ll try to help.”

Six

As Bosley led Christine out into the hall, Sabrina looked at the squawkbox on the desk and asked, "What are our assignments, Charlie?"

"Your first assignment, Sabrina, is to check the arrest record and the record of trial. Kelly, your first assignment is to find out whether Elizabeth Hunter is still at the prison farm, what her status is if she is still there, and why a false report of her escape was made. Jill, your first assignment is to contact Elizabeth's former employer in New Orleans, and anyone else there who may have known her."

"Why do you call them first assignments?" Kelly asked.

"Because if nothing comes of them, I have a more interesting assignment for all three of you. Sabrina and Kelly, you will have to perform your first assignments in rather elaborate disguises, in the event that subsequent action is required. But that won't be necessary in Jill's case."

Sabrina asked curiously, "What will the subsequent action be, if it is required, Charlie?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, angel. Bosley will brief you on your first assignments."

"What will you be doing while we're in Louisiana, Charlie?" Jill asked.

"The usual, Jill. Working my fingers to the bone, trying to lure new accounts. I'll be casting for another big one as soon as I hang up. I have to say good-bye now, because I don't want the competition to hook this fellow away from me."

Charlie reached into the parked jeep he was standing beside to hang up the phone. He was wearing waders and a fishing hat stuck full of trout flies, and held a fly rod in his left hand. As he started toward the stream only a dozen yards from the road, a feminine squeal of triumph came from the cute little blonde in waders standing waist deep in the center of the stream.

"I hooked him, Charlie!" she called joyously as she tried to slow the speed of the line spinning off the singing reel. "The big fellow we spotted beneath the log!"

Charlie sighed. "This time the competition won," he said to himself.

Bosley came back into the room, lifted three large manila envelopes from atop his desk, and handed one to each angel. The girls opened them to examine the contents.

Bosley said to Kelly, "You will note that you are a Ph.D. candidate in sociology from Columbia University, with a federal grant to do a study of rehabilitation programs in women's prisons. Somewhere among those papers you will find a letter of introduction from the attorney general of Louisiana to the warden of the Pine Parish Prison Farm requesting that she give you full cooperation."

Shuffling through the material, Kelly located the letter. "Will the attorney general confirm it if the warden gives him a phone call?" she asked.

Bosley gave her a wounded look.

"I know," Kelly said apologetically. "As usual, Charlie was thorough. I assume a phone call to the Columbia University graduate school would also confirm that I was a Ph.D. candidate?"

"Of course."

Studying her material, Sabrina said, "I see I'm a feature writer for *Newsworld*, researching an article on drug abuse in rural America. Also with a letter of introduction from Louisiana's attorney general. Only this one is directed to all peace officers in the state, requesting that I be given cooperation."

"The attorney general is a personal friend of Charlie's," Bosley explained.

Jill said, "Sometimes I think every VIP in the country must be a personal friend of Charlie's. All there is in my envelope is a round-trip airline ticket to New Orleans and a car rental reservation."

"You need no cover story, because you won't be in enemy territory," Bosley told her. "Just tell the people you interview the truth, that you represent Townsend Investigations, and we've been retained to find out what happened to Elizabeth Hunter."

"I have a round-trip ticket to New Orleans and a car rental reservation also," Kelly said.

"So do I," Sabrina put in.

"You'll all fly together as far as New Orleans," Bosley told them. "Then you'll go your three separate ways. Or, rather, Jill will go her separate way, and Kelly and Sabrina will go theirs after a slight detour together."

"Detour where?" Kelly asked.

"To the home of a retired policeman who is an old friend of Charlie's. Man named Otto Saltman."

"What do we do there?" Sabrina asked.

"You have your looks changed. Saltman is a master of disguise."

"Will he make us look glamorous?" Kelly asked hopefully.

"You're both already glamorous," Bosley said with unaccustomed gallantry. "Charlie wants you to look so totally different from your usual appearances that if you are later seen by those you interview, there will be no chance of recognition."

"Oh, oh," Sabrina said. "Bosley is breaking it to us gently, Kelly. We're going to be a couple of frumps."

When the blue Ford pulled up before the prison gate, the guard saw by the sticker on its windshield that it was a rented car. The driver got out and came over to the gate.

She was a woman of indeterminate age, probably

somewhere between twenty and thirty, with mouse-colored hair parted in the middle and pulled severely back to cover her ears and be gathered in a tight bun at the nape of her neck. She wore horn-rimmed glasses that rode forward on her nose, and had more teeth than the guard had ever before seen in a woman's mouth. They were large and so bucked that she didn't seem able to close her mouth completely. She wore a shapeless two-piece tweed suit with a skirt hanging halfway between her knees and ankles, and with an inch of white slip showing beneath that. She had on mannish flat-heeled shoes and had such a stiff, graceless walk that the guard looked down at her feet, half expecting to see her walking on the sides of her shoes, in the manner of Milton Berle doing his funny walk.

"Hi," she said brightly, pushing a folded sheet of paper to the guard through the message slot in the gate.

After scanning the paper, he pushed it back through and unlocked the gate.

"That's the administration building, Miss Smithers," he said, pointing. "Check in there."

Kelly got back into the car, drove through the gate and over to the indicated building. Inside there was a long room divided by a counter behind which there were two desks. Beyond them was a chain-link grille with a row of lockers behind it and a door lettered SHOWER ROOM.

At one of the desks sat a burly, masculine-looking woman in her thirties wearing a tan uniform consisting of an Eisenhower jacket and slacks. At the other sat a busty woman of about the same age in civilian clothes.

The uniformed woman came over to the counter and said, "Yes?"

Kelly handed over her letter of introduction. After reading it, the woman said, "Just a moment, please."

Returning to her desk, carrying the letter with her, she dialed a number. After a short wait, she said, "Warden, there is a Miss Judith Smithers here with a

letter of introduction from the state attorney general. She's doing a doctoral thesis at Columbia University under a government grant on rehabilitation programs in women's prisons."

After listening for a moment, the big woman said, "Okay, Warden."

Hanging up, she came over to return the letter to Kelly, then swung open a hinged section of the counter and came through it.

"This way, Miss Smithers," she said, leading the way through a door to the right of the room.

They went along a corridor and turned a corner to an office at the end of the second hall. There they entered a large office where behind an oval desk sat an attractive middle-aged woman with a thin, patrician face framed by black hair, dressed in a beige pantsuit.

"Warden Sorenson, Miss Smithers," the big woman introduced.

Giving Kelly a polite but cold smile, the warden said, "How do you do, Miss Smithers?" Then she glanced at the woman in uniform. "Thanks, Maxine. You needn't wait."

The big woman left the room. Kelly handed the warden her letter of introduction and flopped ungracefully into a chair before the desk. After reading the letter, Warden Sorenson pushed it back to Kelly.

"We will of course give you full cooperation, Miss Smithers," she said. "But I'm afraid the Pine Parish Prison Farm doesn't have much of a rehabilitaton program. Our predominantly male legislature doesn't seem to feel that female prisoners require rehabilitation, with the result that while substantial appropriations are made for such programs in male prisons, virtually nothing is appropriated for similar programs in woman's prisons. It's the old story of male chauvinism."

"You have no rehabilitation program at all, then?" Kelly asked.

"Oh, we do what we can without funds. We teach girls to cook by giving them kitchen duty, and teach

them such trades as laundry worker or gardener, and we have some prisoner-run classes in such things as sewing and knitting. But we have no trained professional staff specializing in rehabilitation work."

Kelly said, "Well, I would like to observe what you do have."

"Of course. I'll arrange for a guide to take you around."

Picking up one of the two phones on her desk, she dialed. After a wait, she asked into the phone, "Any of the barracks guards free at the moment, Maxine?"

She listened, then said, "Send her to my office."

While waiting for the guide to appear, Kelly said, "I noticed that your barracks windows aren't barred, Warden, and that you have only a fence around the prison instead of a wall. Also that there are no guard towers."

"This is only a medium-security prison, Miss Smithers. We take no dangerous prisoners or serious offenders. The median sentence here is three years, and no one is sent here with more than five years to serve."

"Do you ever have any escapes?"

"Infrequently. It isn't as simple as it may look. Attack dogs patrol the grounds after dark."

"But you have had escapes?"

"Oh, yes."

"How often?"

"Attempts perhaps once a year. Few get over the fence, and most of those who do are recaptured before they get very far. Those who do get away are invariably picked up somewhere else eventually."

"Invariably?"

"Well, currently an escapee is still at large. Been gone about a month. But she'll probably turn up eventually."

"Did she have long to serve?" Kelly asked.

"No, only a year. But when she's recaptured, she'll probably get an additional year for prison escape."

"What was she in for?" Kelly asked curiously.
"Possession of drugs."

A strapping blonde amazon in uniform appeared in the doorway.

"Come in, Fran," the warden said.

She introduced the woman as Fran Grassley, and explained to her Miss Smithers's reason for being there. She instructed the guard to show the visitor everything she wanted to see.

After the two left the office, Velma Sorenson considered for a few moments, then called Sheriff Clint on her direct line.

When she got him, she said, "Sheriff, there's a woman here with a letter of introduction from the state attorney general who is doing a government-financed study of rehabilitation programs in women's prisons for a doctoral thesis at Columbia University. She seems on the up-and-up, but it occurs to me as just possible it's a sneaky way for the attorney general to conduct an investigation into our little racket."

After a period of silence the sheriff said slowly, "A female reporter from *Newsworld* is en route to my office right now. The desk says she has a letter of introduction from the attorney general, too. Maybe we'd both better check these people out before we get too cooperative."

"All right," the warden agreed. "I'll phone Columbia U, and you phone *Newsworld*."

Fifteen minutes later she called the sheriff back.

"Mine's no plant," she told him. "She's actually a Ph.D. candidate in sociology, and has a government grant to do research on her thesis. How about yours?"

"Haven't had a chance yet," the sheriff said.

"She still in your office?"

"Yes."

"Well, after you check her out, let me know."

"Sure, Warden."

A half hour later he called back to report that *Newsworld* had verified that his visitor was actually

one of their reporters, and was on assignment to do a feature story on drug abuse in rural areas.

"Guess it's just a coincidence that they both showed up at the same time," he said.

Seven

As Kelly and her guide walked across the prison compound, Kelly said, "The warden tells me you recently had an escape."

"Yes," the blonde amazon said. "A girl from my barracks."

"Oh? How'd she do it?"

"She was in the infirmary, unattended. She cut out the window screen with a scalpel somebody had left lying around and made it over the fence before the dogs got her. It was early in the morning, before anyone was up."

"Why was she in the infirmary?" Kelly asked.

The guard gave her a peculiar look. "She was sick. Or said she was. Probably just an excuse to get in the infirmary, so she could bust out."

They came to a barracks numbered ten, and Kelly's guide led her inside. "This is my barracks," she said. She made a sweeping gesture to encompass the two rows of bunks along the walls. "Twenty-four prisoners when we're full up. I only got twenty-three right now, since Hunter took off, and two more get released in a couple of days."

"Hunter was the girl who escaped?"

"Yes. Elizabeth Hunter." She pointed to a door at the far end of the big room. "That's the latrine and shower room. Six shower heads." She jerked a thumb

at a door at the front of the room. "And that's my quarters."

Fran Grassley showed Kelly the rest of the prison, including a couple of empty barracks where she said classes in sewing and knitting were held on Saturdays. Kelly commented that there didn't seem to be many prisoners around.

"Most of them are working the farm right now," her guide explained. "That's over beyond those trees." She pointed to a stand of trees on the side of the prison opposite the front gate.

They started past one barracks with barred windows and a padlock on the front door. Stopping, Kelly asked, "What's this?"

"Supplies," Fran Grassley said, continuing on, but then also stopping when Kelly failed to follow.

"Why the bars?" Kelly asked.

"To keep prisoners out. There's a lot of valuable stuff in there."

She started on again, and this time Kelly followed. But she kept glancing back over her shoulder at the building, curious because something in her guide's tone had suggested that she was uneasy about answering questions about the place and was deliberately hurrying Kelly past it. They were well beyond the building when a pale face peered out after them from one of the barred windows.

Kelly sensed that questioning her guard about it would bring denial that anyone was in the building, and that the woman would suggest she had imaged the face. She decided against mentioning it.

When the tour ended, Kelly thanked her guide and asked her to relay thanks to the warden. As she drove away, she thought about the person in the barred building. Could that possibly have been Elizabeth Hunter, she wondered, being held under special security because her sister had asked some questions the prison administrators didn't want to answer?

Then she decided she was reaching into left field. She had gotten the impression that her guide, at least,

actually believed that Elizabeth Hunter had escaped, and wasn't simply covering up on that score. But she had definitely been covering up the true purpose of the barred building. Probably it was simply a special punishment center for recalcitrant prisoners, and the techniques used in it would not bear public scrutiny. It seemed farfetched to think the face she had seen could belong to Elizabeth Hunter. Insofar as the evidence was concerned, there seemed at this point no reason to believe the girl hadn't actually made an escape.

When Sheriff Clint got a phone call while Sabrina was in his office, and addressed the caller as "Warden," Sabrina guessed from his noncommittal answers that the call concerned her. When, after he hung up, he excused himself for a few minutes to go into another office, she became sure of it. She eased his desk phone off its cradle just in time to hear a voice say, "*Newsworld*."

She was thankful that Charlie Townsend was always so thorough, because the sheriff's voice asked to speak to the managing editor. She listened to the editor confirm that Minerva Edwards—the name Sabrina had given the sheriff—worked for *Newsworld* and was on the assignment she had told the sheriff.

Sheriff Clint was also thorough. To make sure it was actually the *Newsworld* reporter in his office, and not some imposter who had somehow stolen the reporter's credentials, he gave the editor a description of the disguised Sabrina. The description was hardly flattering to her, but it was a credit to the expertise of retired policeman Otto Saltman, who was responsible for her disguise. He had not only made her unrecognizable, but had added years to her age and, with padding, pounds to her figure.

"She about forty?" the sheriff asked. "Kinda pudgy, with caroty hair worn in one of them kinky Afro hairdos? And with granny glasses?"

The editor assured him that was Minerva Edwards.

"Reason I'm askin' all this is 'cause them yellow exposé sheets keep sendin' around reporters who'll tell you any sort of lie to get a statement, then misquote you. Wanted to make sure she really is with *Newsworld*. Now I know, I'll give her cooperation."

"Thank you," the managing editor said politely. "We appreciate that."

Sabrina waited until the sheriff hung up the other extension before hanging up herself, so that he would not hear the click.

When he came back into the room, he apologized for keeping her waiting, then asked just what information she wanted.

Sabrina said, "First I would like to talk to the head of your narcotics squad to get the general picture of narcotics use in this county, then I'd like to go over your drug-arrest records for the past couple of years."

"Well, first, we don't have a narc squad. Don't believe in all them special squads like they got in the big cities. My deputies jes' work any case happens to come up when they're on duty. Second, it ain't a county, it's a parish."

"Of course," Sabrina said apologetically. "I keep forgetting Louisiana's unique terminology. Maybe you could give me the general picture, Sheriff."

"Sure. Ain't a lot of dope fiends among the residents of this parish, Miss Edwards. Most of our dope arrests is visitors from the cities, or from out of state. Our own farm people are mostly law-abidin' and God-fearin' folks who may sip a little moon now'n then, but wouldn't touch no dope with a ten-foot pole."

"I see. Now may I see the arrest records?"

"Sure. See Miss Purdy in the records section down the hall. I'll phone her up to expect you."

In the records section Sabrina made a pretense of studying all the arrest records involving narcotics for the past two years, but she concentrated on those of nonresidents of the parish. Almost all of those were women, she noted with bemusement, and while most had been tried in the parish seat district court, a half

dozen had been tried in District Court Thirteen at Rustic Pines. Invariably those had been charged with a variety of crimes aside from drug possession, but had pleaded guilty to simple drug possession on plea bargains reducing charges to that, and had been sentenced to terms averaging about a year at the Pine Parish Prison Farm for Women.

Elizabeth Hunter, for instance, had originally been charged with illegal camping in a parish park, creating a fire hazard, possession of narcotics for sale, resisting arrest, and assault with a deadly weapon on a police officer. All those charges had been reduced to one count of possession of heroin, to which she had pleaded guilty.

All six of the women tried in District Court Thirteen had been arrested by Sheriff Clint and his chief deputy, Sam Crowder.

From the parish seat Sabrina drove her rented Chevrolet to Rustic Pines. The single street of the tiny village was deserted when she parked in front of the building containing both general store and the district court. Finding the door of the latter locked, she went into the store.

A thin, knobby woman of middle age came from the rear when a bell over the door jangled.

"Hi," Sabrina said. "When is the courtroom next door open?"

"Only when there's cases," the woman said. "Judge Newley sits over at the parish seat, too. Only comes over here when there's a case, and hasn't been one in a couple of weeks."

"Oh. How do I get in touch with the court clerk?"

"You're in touch. That's me."

"Well, that's a break," Sabrina said, pleased. "I'm Minerva Edwards of *Newsworld*, down here to do a piece on drug use in rural areas."

"Not much of that around here," the court clerk said.

Sabrina said, "According to sheriff's department records, six defendants have been tried in District

Court Thirteen for drug possession during the past two years. Sheriff Clint promised me full cooperation. May I see those trial records?"

After thinking this over, the woman shrugged. "They're public records, I guess. Come along."

She led the way to a door at the left side of the store, unlocked it, and ushered Sabrina into a small room that seemed to be a combination of judge's chambers and the court clerk's office. From a file cabinet she picked a half dozen trial transcripts and laid them on the court clerk's desk.

"When you're through, just leave 'em there," she said. "I'll put 'em back."

She went back into the store, leaving Sabrina alone.

Eight

Sabrina skimmed through the transcripts quickly. In each case, including that of Elizabeth Hunter, there had been the same prosecutor and the same court-appointed attorney. But even more intriguing was their names. The prosecutor, Nathan Clint, had the same last name as the sheriff, and the defense attorney, Jonathan Newley, had the same last name as the judge.

Then she noticed that the court clerk had signed all the transcripts "Alice Crowder," which was the same last name as the chief deputy's.

Walking back into the general store, Sabrina found the store-proprietor-court-clerk marking prices on some cans. "Mrs. Crowder?" she said. "Or is it Miss Crowder?"

"Miss."

"Miss Crowder, I noticed that the court-appointed

defense attorney in all those cases was a man named Jonathan Newley. Is he related to Judge Newley?"

"Brother."

"And the prosecutor had the same last name as the sheriff."

"His cousin."

"I see. And you have the same last name as the sheriff's chief deputy."

"My cousin."

Sabrina had a thought. "Are the Newleys, the Clints, and the Crowders interrelated?" she asked.

"Yep. Sheriff and the judge are my cousins, too."

"My, how cozy," Sabrina said thoughtfully.

The woman frowned. "Beg pardon?"

"Just thinking aloud," Sabrina said. "Thanks for your time, Miss Crowder."

As she turned to leave, Kelly came in, still in her disguise. She said, "Hi. Spotted your car as I was going by."

Sabrina had laughed herself nearly sick when she first saw Kelly's disguise. Now her partner's frumpish appearance and enormous buck teeth set her off again. She howled with laughter.

When she ran down, Kelly said, "You're not exactly Miss America yourself, you know."

"But you're a masterpiece," Sabrina said, starting to laugh again, but then managing to control herself.

"It doesn't take much to amuse you, does it?" Kelly said. "You get anything?"

Sobering, Sabrina said, "Quite a bit. You?"

"I'm not sure," Kelly said. "Something funny's going on at that prison, but I can't decide what." She looked at a wall clock. "It's nearly one P.M. You had lunch?"

"No," Sabrina said. She turned to Alice Crowder. "Any place to eat nearby?"

"Which way you heading?"

"New Orleans."

"Dave's Restaurant, five miles south on the right."

"Thanks," Sabrina said.

She and Kelly went out. Alice Crowder gazed after them thoughtfully for a few moments, then went over to a wall phone and called Sheriff Clint.

When she got him on the phone, she said, "Cousin Alice, Burt. You send a woman named Minerva Edwards from *Newsworld* around here?"

"No, but I know who she is. What'd she want there?"

"A look at the trial transcripts of the six women convicted on dope charges in the past couple of years. She seemed kind of interested to find out the judge and the prosecutor and the defense lawyer and the arresting officers and the court clerk were all related."

"What did you tell her?"

"Nothing. She didn't ask anything except about everybody being related. Then another woman showed up who seemed to be a friend of hers, who I gathered from the conversation had been over at the prison asking questions. Said that something funny was going on there."

"What did the second woman look like?" the sheriff asked sharply.

"Kind of funny. Dressed terrible and had big buck teeth. I didn't think she was as funny looking as the *Newsworld* reporter did, though. She howled her head off when her friend walked in."

"You mean she laughed at her?"

"Right in her face."

"That's strange," the sheriff said thoughtfully.
"What'd you make of it?"

"Well, this seems silly, but I kinda thought maybe the funny-looking one didn't always look that way. Like maybe she was in a disguise. If she was, I think maybe both were, because when the *Newsworld* reporter laughed, the other one said something about her not looking like Miss America either."

There was a long silence before the sheriff asked,
"Where are they now?"

"En route to Dave's Restaurant. Gonna have lunch there."

"Thanks, Cousin," the sheriff said. "I appreciate your call."

When he hung up, he dialed Warden Sorenson's direct line at the prison. When the warden answered, he asked, "What's that woman look like who is making the study of prisons?"

"Terrible. Dressed like something out of the thirties, horn-rimmed glasses and big buck teeth."

"I thought so," the sheriff said grimly. "She and my *Newsworld* reporter just met in Rustic Pines. They're workin' together, and the court clerk down there thinks they may both be in disguise. Your researcher was overheard sayin' there's something funny goin' on at the prison. Even though they both checked out, looks like the attorney general sneaked in a couple of investigators on us after all."

Warden Sorenson asked worriedly, "What are we going to do?"

"Make sure they never get their report back to Baton Rouge. Don't worry about it. I'll handle it."

When he hung up, he called Chief Deputy Sam Crowder into his office for a brief conference. When it was over, Crowder hurried to the locker room, changed into civilian clothes, then jumped into an unmarked undercover car and drove at high speed toward Rustic Pines.

Dave's Restaurant turned out to be a truck stop. Kelly and Sabrina had lunch in a booth. Kelly ordered soup, because it was the only thing she could eat with her mouth full of fake teeth. She could have removed them before entering the restaurant, of course, but they were still in Pine Parish, and she was afraid to take the chance of being seen by someone who had met her as Judith Smithers.

Halfway through lunch a tall, lean man in a gray suit came into the diner, looked around, then walked out again. The girls overheard the counterman say to a customer, "Wonder what's up with ol' Sam Crowder?

Took one look and ducked out again. And he's out of uniform."

Perking up her ears, Sabrina said to Kelly in a low voice, "Sam Crowder's the sheriff's chief deputy, who was with him on all those arrests. That must have been Crowder who just poked his head in. Wish I'd gotten a better look at him."

"Looking for us, do you think?" Kelly asked with a touch of worry.

"If he was, I imagine he would have come over. Probably just a coincidence."

Outside, the chief deputy studied the Ford and the Chevrolet parked next to each other alongside the restaurant. They had to be the women's cars, he decided, because they were the only two vehicles with rental-agency stickers on their windshields.

Opening the hood of the Chevrolet, he took a small screwdriver from his pocket, made some adjustments, then slammed the hood closed again.

That should get them both in the same car, he thought, but what could he do to the other car? If this were mountainous country, draining the brake fluid would probably do the job. But while the road between here and New Orleans wound a lot, it was flat as a tabletop. The worst that would probably happen to a brakeless car would be to run off the road into a bayou.

A large, middle-aged truck driver came from the restaurant and started for a parked eighteen-wheeler Kenworth tractor-trailer. Crowder headed him off.

"Hey, Cousin Gary," he said. "Where you headed?"

"New Orleans, to pick up a load," Gary Newley said. "I'm running empty."

"Used to wheel one of those," Crowder said nostalgically, eyeing the fifty-five-foot-long monster with admiration. "Still got my licence and ICC card. Sure would like to wheel one again."

"Be my guest," his cousin said. "I'll climb back in the sleeper compartment."

"Hey, tell you what I will do," Crowder said, as though just having the thought. "I got to run into New

Orleans, too. You drive my car, I'll wheel the truck, and we'll meet somewhere."

Gary Newley eyed him dubiously. "Sounds kind of dumb, Cousin. You ain't never been all that impulsive. Or you got some reason other than impulse?"

"I got a temporary need for your truck," the chief deputy admitted. "Police business."

"Well, why didn't you say so right off?" the trucker asked, removing keys from his pocket and tendering them. "Where's your car?"

Crowder pointed to the undercover car parked in front of the restaurant, and handed over the keys to it. "Meet you where?"

"Truck stop called Minnie's Inn just this side of the city limits. See you there."

"Check. Thanks, Cousin."

"You're welcome, Cousin. Just don't wreck that beauty. I still owe twenty thousand on it."

"I'll handle it with loving care," Crowder assured him.

Nine

Sabrina and Kelly came from the diner and climbed into their respective cars. Kelly started the engine of her blue Ford, then looked across at Sabrina, who was ineffectually grinding the starter of her Chevrolet.

Finally Kelly cut her engine and got out of the car to go over and lift the hood of the Chevrolet. After grinding the starter a couple more times while Kelly stared at the engine, Sabrina called, "Do you know what you're looking for?"

Kelly shook her head. "I don't know anything about engines."

Disgustedly Sabrina got out of the car. "Then why are you acting like you know?"

"I thought I might intimidate it into starting," Kelly said. "It works with plants if you just look at them in a knowing way."

"Plants feed on manure," Sabrina said, peering at the engine. "Do you know what you're looking for?" Kelly asked.

"No, I don't know anything about engines either."

Sabrina kicked the front tire, got in, and tried the starter again. It just ground, without turning over the engine. She got out of the car again.

"Why did you kick the tire?" Kelly asked.

"My father used to do that to the 1921 Model T Ford he bought and reconditioned when I was a kid. Usually worked."

After gazing at Sabrina for a moment, Kelly slammed down the car's hood. "When we get back to New Orleans, you can tell the car rental people where it is," she said. "Come ride with me."

As they pulled away from the restaurant in the blue Ford, a silver-colored eighteen-wheeler truck pulled out behind them.

The two-lane road was narrow and winding, and Kelly was unfamiliar with it, having driven it only once before, from the opposite direction. Kelly stuck to the fifty-five-mile-per-hour speed limit. The silver tractor-trailer rig followed behind about a quarter mile back.

A couple of miles beyond the truck stop, on a stretch where the sides of the road were thick with large pines, the silver truck speeded up until it was just behind them and blared its air horn in signal that it wanted to pass.

As there was a blind curve ahead, Kelly took her foot from the accelerator in order to let the truck get by as quickly as possible. That was all that saved them. The truck swung in sharply when its trailer

was only three-fourths of the way by. Slamming on the brakes and swinging onto the gravel shoulder, Kelly skidded the Ford along the gravel until the trailer was clear of them, then swung back onto the road just in time to avoid crashing head-on into one of the pine trees.

"Whew!" she said as she straightened the car out. "I thought truckers were supposed to be the best drivers on the road."

"He must be the exception that proves the rule," Sabrina said shakily.

About a mile farther on they passed the silver truck pulled over on the shoulder. The cab was too high for Kelly to be able to see the driver from the driver's seat, and Sabrina couldn't see him very well. Sabrina did make out that he was in shirtsleeves, however, because his left elbow rested on the sill of the open cab window.

"Must have shook him up, too," Kelly said as they drove by. "Probably stopped to settle his nerves."

A couple of miles farther on, in a spot where the road wound through bayou country, Kelly spotted the silver truck in the rearview mirror. It was coming up fast, apparently intending to pass for a second time.

"Here comes Barney Oldfield again," Kelly said, slowing to let the truck pass.

In the rearview mirror she saw the huge truck hurtling toward them. When it was within a half dozen car lengths, and still hadn't pulled out to pass, Kelly realized with horror that the driver had no intention of passing, but deliberately meant to ram them from the rear.

She floored the accelerator. The Ford instantly leaped forward, but she had slowed to about forty, and the truck was moving at about sixty-five. The gap between them closed with heart-stopping quickness. There was a slight click as the truck's front bumper barely touched the Ford's rear one, then the interval grew to a foot, a yard, a car length, and finally to a

half dozen car lengths again as Kelly frantically poured on the gas.

Gazing fearfully over her shoulder, Sabrina said, "That maniac is trying to kill us!"

"Tell me something I don't know," Kelly said as she roared around a curve at seventy miles an hour.

They came to a long, straight stretch. In the rear-view mirror Kelly saw the interval begin to close again. She increased her speed to seventy-five. The truck continued to close. She pushed the Ford to eighty, then to eighty-five before the interval stopped getting smaller. The truck remained about four car lengths back, neither gaining nor losing.

On this narrow road eighty-five miles per hour was a near suicidal rate, even on a straight stretch. And a half mile ahead Kelly spotted a curve to the right. Simultaneously they whizzed by a sign reading REST AREA - 1 MILE, and she had an idea.

Kelly momentarily drove the Ford to ninety in order to increase the interval between it and the truck to a dozen car lengths. With an eye on the curve ahead, the truck driver simultaneously slowed.

As they approached the curve, Kelly took her foot from the accelerator and slowed until the truck was barely a heart-stopping yard behind them. Then, as they flashed by a curve sign labeled "50," she floored the accelerator and roared around the curve at around eighty, managing to stay on the road only because she was accelerating around the curve.

The truck lost some distance in maneuvering the curve, and was again six car lengths back when both vehicles straightened out. This was not a heavily traveled road, and so far they had encountered no other vehicles going their way, and only two coming from the other direction. But now a slow-moving farm truck suddenly appeared in front of them at the same time a Volkswagen sedan was coming toward them.

Blaring the Ford's horn, Kelly swung around the truck. With its air horn blasting, the huge truck swung right behind it. The Volkswagen took to the shoulder,

then swung back onto the road after the truck roared past.

Up ahead Kelly spotted the entrance to the rest area, with a sign before it reading EXIT SPEED - 30. Just beyond the rest area was another curve, this time to the left, and this time the curve speed was listed as thirty.

Without slowing and without signaling, Kelly suddenly swung into the entrance to the rest area, completely catching the truck driver by surprise. The truck shot on by as Kelly stood on the brake and fought the wheel to screech the Ford to a halt just before a sharp right turn into the area where there were picnic benches and rest rooms.

The truck's air brakes hissed as the driver attempted to slow for the sharp left turn just beyond the rest area. But he had been adjusting his speed to that of the Ford instead of looking ahead at the curve sign, and it was too late. The truck crashed through a guard rail and came to a halt fender-deep in a shallow bayou alongside the road.

Kelly drove on out the exit from the rest area and past the mired truck. The truck was half faced away from them, so that they couldn't see into the cab.

"Think he'll be able to back out of there?" Kelly asked.

"Not without a tow truck," Sabrina said. "We're rid of him."

"You get a decent look at him?" Kelly asked.

"A half-decent one. The cab was too high to see into when he was right behind us, so I could only see him when the truck was a ways back. I got a kind of funny impression, though."

"What?"

"Remember those slides Bosley showed us?"

"Yes, of course."

"I could be mistaken, but the driver's face looked to me like Chief Deputy Sheriff Sam Crowder."

Kelly drove in silence for a time before saying,

"Wow! That's an interesting thought. And he looked in on us at the diner."

"But how did he break our cover?" Sabrina asked.

"He couldn't have," Kelly said in a definite tone.

"Then why did he try to kill us?"

Kelly was silent for a time, thinking this over. Eventually she said thoughtfully, "We talked kind of freely in front of that woman in the general store. And didn't you say everyone in Rustic Pines is related?"

"Yes. She's the sheriff's cousin. That has to be it. She phoned the sheriff. He couldn't have guessed who we were, or what we were after, but apparently it was enough to know we were working together and were digging into matters that couldn't stand light. He panicked and sent his chief deputy to shut us up."

"But how did Crowder find us so fast?" Kelly asked.

"Alice Crowder at the general store told the sheriff. She knew we were stopping at that restaurant."

After thinking this over, Kelly said, "I think you've got it figured out. Shall we stop and call the police?"

"What police?" Sabrina asked. "We're still in Pine Parish, and the sheriff's office is the police. Just keep heading for New Orleans."

In New Orleans, Kelly drove straight to their hotel. Leaving the blue Ford on the parking lot, they went in by the back door and took an elevator to the fourth floor. In their suite they removed their disguises and both put on pantsuits.

Gazing into a dresser mirror and working her mouth, Kelly said, "Am I glad to get those silly teeth out of my mouth."

"Don't throw them away," Sabrina advised. "If you ever decide to become a TV comic, they'll come in handy. You won't have to say a word to bring down the house. Just open your mouth."

"Save that body padding, too," Kelly suggested. "You can be my stooge."

Just as they finished dressing, Jill came into the suite. She was wearing a knit skirt-and-jacket suit that clung to her body like wet paper.

"Anything interesting happen to you two?" Jill asked.

"Plenty," Kelly said. She and Sabrina described everything that had occurred in Pine Parish.

When they finished, Jill asked in a fascinated voice, "What do you make of it all?"

Sabrina said, "What I make of it is that there's some kind of conspiracy going on involving virtually every public official in the parish. Or at least those of them that live in Rustic Pines. What it is, I haven't the foggiest notion, except that it seems to involve railroad-ing lone visiting women to prison."

Kelly asked, "Did you get anything, Jill?"

Jill said, "I got verification of Christine's claim that her sister had no use for drugs. Mrs. Pournelle, whom Elizabeth worked for as a dress model, put me in touch with some of the other models who knew Elizabeth. Elizabeth hadn't been close to any of them, but they liked her well enough, and invited her to some of their parties. At one she left in indignation because somebody began passing around a joint of marijuana. The next day she apologized to the hostess, but explained that she refused to be around anyone who used dope of any kind."

"That's good enough evidence for me," Sabrina said. "She was framed into prison."

"The next question is why?" Jill said.

"Maybe Charlie can figure that out," Kelly said. "Let's get back and report to him what we have."

Ten

Charlie's Angels flew back to Los Angeles late that night, landing at International Airport at midnight. Since John Bosley had told them he wanted their reports the moment they got back, regardless of the hour, they phoned him at home. After listening to the reports of all three, he set a meeting for one P.M. the next day at the office.

At one P.M. the three Angels and Bosley were all gathered in the office, waiting for the phone to ring. It rang at five after.

Lifting the phone from its cradle and switching on the squawkbox attachment, Bosley said, "All present, Charlie."

"Good, Bosley," the cultured voice of Charlie Townsend said from the squawkbox. "Welcome back, angels."

"Good afternoon, Charlie," they chorused.

Charlie said, "I am pleased with your reports, but they raise as many questions as they answer. Particularly after a series of phone calls I made this morning."

"To whom, Charlie?" Sabrina asked.

"A number of people. Suffice to say, Sabrina, that they concerned the other six girls you learned had been railroaded into prison like Elizabeth Hunter. All were young, attractive, and, like Elizabeth, alone in the world, so that no one was likely to check on their whereabouts. Four had previous records, but none of them involved narcotics charges. Two were convicted

shoplifters, two had several convictions each as prostitutes."

"Are all six still in prison?" Kelly asked.

"None are. They all finished their terms and were paroled. Except the two without previous convictions never reported to their parole officers, and are wanted as parole violators."

"Why do you suppose they didn't report, Charlie?" Jill asked.

Charlie said, "There is no evidence to support this guess, but it occurred to me as at least possible that they never left the prison."

"You mean they may have been murdered?" Kelly asked.

"Consider these factors, Kelly. Seven young, attractive women seem to have been railroaded into the Pine Parish Prison Farm during the past couple of years. Four were hardened pros who made no waves after they got out about what was done to them. Perhaps simply because they were used to being kicked around by the establishment, perhaps because they were offered some inducement to remain silent. But the three with no previous criminal records simply disappeared. Two are listed on prison records as having been paroled, one as an escapee. Perhaps the records tell the truth, but it strikes me as coincidental that the three most likely to create a public fuss over what was done to them are not available for interviews."

Kelly said, "I'm pretty sure Elizabeth's barracks guard thinks she actually escaped, Charlie. I don't think she was intelligent enough to fake belief."

"Every employee at the prison wouldn't necessarily be in on the conspiracy, Kelly. Anyway, I'm not charging murder just yet. I'm merely pointing out some suspicious circumstances. It is now time, angels, for the alternative action I previously mentioned. Sabrina and Kelly, when I explain it, you will understand why disguise was necessary for your first assignment."

"I have a hunch we're not going to like the second assignment," Sabrina murmured.

Apparently Charlie had acute hearing, because he said, "You'll love it, Sabrina. You all get vacations at a large resort where your room and board will be free."

Kelly asked suspiciously, "Is this resort named the Pine Parish Prison Farm, Charlie?"

"You guessed it, angel."

"You're sending us to prison?" Kelly said. "Charlie, you've got to be kidding."

"It's no joke, angel."

Hiking her eyebrows, Jill said, "You can say that again."

Charlie said, "The answer to the mystery lies within the prison, angels. So the best way to solve it is from inside. In the event things came to this, I began feeling out certain members of the Pine Parish Sheriff's Department even before you girls left for New Orleans. Your contact in Pine Parish will be a sheriff's deputy named Dan Winston."

"Just a minute, Charlie," Bosley said.

Going over to close the sliding door, he returned to the desk to press the buttons that closed the window shutters, brought the screen down from the ceiling, and switched on the slide projector. A slide of a handsome, straight-backed man of about thirty in a tan uniform appeared on the screen.

"This is Dan Winston," Bosley said. "He's working with us. Try to keep in touch with him as much as you can."

Jill asked, "Bosley, just how are we supposed to get in prison?"

Bosley switched off the machine, caused the screen to retract and the shutters to open and let in light. Smiling, he said, "Don't worry, Jill. In Pine Parish that's easy. Very easy."

Kelly asked, "Have you ever been in jail, Charlie?"

"Only in prisons of my own making, angel. You might say I'm confined right now, in a psychological

sense. I'm so pinned down, it's going to take a great deal of effort to get back on my feet."

That was because he was lying in a hammock with a curvaceous young woman nestled against his shoulder, also listening on the phone. The girl emitted a little giggle.

Jill said, "Charlie, that wasn't your laugh."

"If it wasn't, may I swing for it," Charlie said. "Good luck, angels."

Although it was a nineteen-hundred-mile drive from Los Angeles to Pine Parish, Louisiana, Bosley instructed the girls to make the trip in one of their cars. He explained that it was necessary for them to be stopped in a car with an out-of-state license, and also to have one whose ownership was traceable back to one of them.

"The attempt on Kelly's and Sabrina's lives shows that they know someone is trying to investigate them," Bosley explained. "Charlie's guess is that they think it's the Louisiana attorney general. We want to make sure they don't suspect you girls, and if you check out as being from nearly two thousand miles from there, they're less likely to be suspicious than if you're driving a rented car from New Orleans." He handed Sabrina and Kelly each a small pocket holder containing a folded card. "Make sure the sheriff finds these on you."

Withdrawing the folded cards, the girls discovered that they were parole-report records on which the parole officer listed the date and time of each monthly visit by the parolee and initialed the entry. The parole officer in each case was listed as John Bosley, and his telephone number was at the top of the card.

"What were we in for, Boz?" Sabrina asked.

"For rolling customers as prostitutes," Bosley said. "You will note that there are twelve entries on each card, the last dated a week ago, which means your paroles are just up. Otherwise you wouldn't be free to leave the state."

Kelly said, "That Charlie thinks of everything."

Bosley frowned. "I happened to think of that," he said with dignity.

The girls decided to take Sabrina's Pinto. They started that night, with the car trunk loaded with luggage and camping gear. Alternating drivers every two hundred miles, they drove straight on through in thirty-six hours, catching naps when they weren't driving.

Twenty miles from the Pine Parish line they checked into a motel for a few hours of real sleep, then headed for Pine Parish at eight o'clock in the morning, refreshed, showered, and dressed in jeans and blouses. They had moved the camping gear from the trunk to the back seat, and all three sat in front. Sabrina was driving, and Kelly sat in the middle.

As soon as they were over the parish line, Sabrina began to speed. They drove up one road and down another at sixty-five and seventy miles an hour until nearly noon without running across any cruising police cars.

"Just like they always say," Jill said finally. "You can never find a cop when you need one."

"We just found one," Sabrina said, looking into her rearview mirror. "And he's coming hell-bent for leather."

The police car's red light flashed and its siren growled a throaty command to pull over. Taking her foot from the gas, Sabrina gradually slowed and drifted over on the shoulder. The police car pulled in behind them, the siren died, but the red light kept flashing.

Two uniformed men got from the car. Sabrina, of course, knew the sheriff from her role as Minerva Edwards. The other two girls recognized him from the slide photograph Bosley had shown them. They all recognized his lean companion from his slide photo as Chief Deputy Sam Crowder.

"Well, here we go," Kelly said.

Jill opened the car door and got out. "Here I go,"

she said, reaching in the back seat to lift out her knapsack.

She started to walk away, but the lean chief deputy strode past her, then stepped in front of her to block her way. He looked her up and down with no expression on his face, but with deep interest in his eyes.

Behind her the sheriff said, "Where do you think you're going?"

Turning around to look at him, Jill said, "For a walk."

"No, you're not," he said. "Get back to the car."

"Hey, this is a free country," Jill protested. "I can walk where I want."

"Right now you're not walking anywhere, little lady. You're with them and they were speeding."

"I'm not with them," Jill objected. "I don't even know them. They picked me up ten, twenty miles back."

Sheriff Clint took Jill's arm and led her back to the car. "It's also against the law to hitchhike in Pine Parish," he told her.

Jill tried to pull her arm free, but the sheriff's grip was too firm. By now Sabrina and Kelly had also climbed from the car.

Sabrina said, "I hope you're not going to hold me responsible for that girl's actions. If I'd known hitchhiking was illegal, I wouldn't have picked her up."

After glancing at his chief deputy to make sure he was prepared to grab Jill in the event she tried to bolt, the sheriff released his grip on her arm. He said to Sabrina, "You're not responsible for her, ma'am. But you are responsible for your speeding. May I see your driver's license and registration, please?"

Sabrina leaned back into the car to fish her driver's license from her purse on the front seat and to get the car registration from the glove compartment.

After studying both, the sheriff handed them back to her. "I see you're from Los Angeles, Miss Duncan." He looked her up and down in a measuring way, then turned to Kelly. "What's your name?"

"Kelly Garrett."

"You a hitchhiker, too?"

"No, I'm with Sabrina."

"From Los Angeles, too?"

Kelly nodded. "We're on vacation together."

"From what?"

"I beg your pardon?" Kelly asked.

"What's your line of work?"

Kelly looked slightly embarrassed. "Well, at the moment we happen to be unemployed."

The sheriff said patiently, "What do you work at when you have jobs?"

"We're actresses," Sabrina said.

Eleven

Sheriff Clint cocked a disbelieving eyebrow at Sabrina. But at the same time he looked interested, because it was common practice for prostitutes to claim they were actresses when questioned by police. He looked all three girls over again, thoroughly, then turned back to Sabrina.

"You married?" he asked.

"Divorced."

"Have parents?"

Sabrina saw her father regularly, but she knew what the sheriff was looking for was women with no close relatives or friends who might come looking for them. She shook her head.

"Any close friends you can call on for bail money?"

"Bail money?" Sabrina said. "Why would I need bail money for a simple traffic offense?"

"Ninety-two miles an hour in a posted zone ain't no simple traffic offense, lady."

"Ninety-two!" Sabrina said indignantly. "I wasn't going anywhere near that fast."

"What we clocked you. Wanta answer my question? Got anybody to bail you out?"

Sabrina shook her head. "Nobody I can think of."

He looked at Kelly. "How about you?"

"Why would I need bail? I'm just a passenger."

"Answer the question, please."

Glaring at him, she said, "No, I have no husband or parents, and no friends except Sabrina who give a damn about me."

The sheriff looked at Jill. "And you?"

"I'm not going to need bail, either," Jill said. "I haven't done anything."

"You want to answer the question?" the sheriff asked patiently.

"All right," Jill said in a defiant tone. "No, there's nobody gives a damn whether I rot in jail or not."

He looked her up and down again, with obvious approval. "What's your name?"

"Jill Munroe."

"Where you from?"

"El Paso originally. From most anywhere, last couple of years."

"Where you headed?"

Jill shrugged. "To see the country."

"You one of them hippies that moves around from one commune to the next?"

"I've lived in some communes," Jill admitted.

The sheriff decided he had all the information he needed. He said to his chief deputy, "Take a look through their luggage."

Nodding, the lean man rounded the car to reach through the driver's window for the keys, then went around back to open the trunk.

Sabrina turned a seductive smile on the sheriff. "Isn't there some friendly way we could settle this, officer?"

His black eyebrows beetled at her. "You offering a bribe?"

"Not in money," Sabrina said. "But there's two of us, and two of you cops and—well, this is kind of isolated country and we have some blankets in the car."

"Soliciting for prostitution," the sheriff said. "You hear that, Sam?"

"I heard it," the lean man said. "And look what we got here."

He held aloft two plastic bags, the larger one containing what looked through the transparent plastic like marijuana, the smaller one full of red and white capsules.

"Well, well," the sheriff said in a pleased voice. "Planning a little pill and pot party, ladies?"

"What are you talking about?" Kelly said indignantly. "That wasn't in our car."

"Tell it to the judge," the sheriff said, smiling.

Sam Crowder slammed the trunk lid and came forward to hand the two plastic bags to the sheriff. Jill picked that moment to make a run for it. She got about ten feet when the chief deputy brought her down with a flying tackle. Pulling her wrists behind her, he handcuffed her before jerking her to her feet. Picking up her dropped knapsack, he steered her back to the car and tossed the knapsack in the back seat.

Taking out his handcuffs, the sheriff said to Crowder, "We'll need one more set from the car."

Nodding, the chief deputy continued on to the police car.

Sheriff Clint said to Sabrina, "Turn your back and cross your wrists behind you."

"You're not handcuffing her," Kelly said angrily, giving him a push.

With remarkable quickness for so large a man, the sheriff spun Kelly around and forced her arms behind her. The cuffs clicked around her wrists instead of on Sabrina's.

"You leave her alone!" Sabrina said, grabbing Kelly away from him.

Sam Crowder returned with another pair of handcuffs, whipped Sabrina's wrists behind her, and snapped the cuffs into place.

"You know what you two just done?" the sheriff said in a pleased tone to Sabrina and Kelly. "On top of drug possession, attempted bribery, solicitation for prostitution, speeding, and resisting arrest, one of you's guilty of assault on a police officer, the other of lynching."

"Lynching?" they both said together.

"When you try to take a prisoner from a police officer, legally that's lynching, even if you don't mean the prisoner no harm." He smiled at Sabrina. "You done that." He turned the smile on Kelly. "And you assaulted a police officer."

"What did I do to deserve handcuffs?" Jill demanded.

"Resisted arrest," the sheriff said promptly. "Plus attempted flight from the police after the commission of a felony."

"Hitchhiking's a felony around here?" Jill asked wonderingly.

"Peddling dope is, and all three of you is guilty of that. Let's go, ladies. Sam, you take them in the squad car, and I'll follow you in their car."

The girls were driven to the jail in Rustic Pines. Sabrina and Kelly were placed together in one cell, Jill was locked in the other one.

The lean chief deputy brought in their luggage, and through the open door into the substation office the girls could see the sheriff thoroughly going through it. They saw him find the two parole cards and examine them with interest. He put them in his pocket.

When the sheriff was finished checking their luggage, Sam Crowder carried it back to the cells. Jill asked him if they were going to get any lunch.

Overhearing the question, the sheriff called from the

office, "Past lunchtime. Nigh onto one P.M. You'll get supper."

He and the chief deputy left the building.

Examining her cell, Jill said, "Not exactly the Ritz, is it? And the only luggage I have is this knapsack. No blanket."

"We've got four blankets in our camping stuff," Kelly said.

She fished one from the pile of camping equipment and pushed it through the bars to Jill.

"Thanks," Jill said. "What do you suppose happens next?"

"My guess would be that we just sit here while the sheriff checks us out," Sabrina said.

Jill said, "I hope Charlie fixed things with the El Paso police so that I'll check out okay."

"Has Charlie ever failed to fix things?" Kelly asked.

About six P.M. an enormously fat woman appeared with three bowls of stew, three slices of bread, and three mugs of coffee. It was excellent stew, and the coffee was freshly perked, and the bread was home-made. Having missed lunch, the girls ate hungrily.

At seven the woman came to collect the dirty dishes. Then they didn't see her again until nine, when she returned to ask if they wanted the hall light off. Having nothing better to do than sleep, they told her yes, rolled themselves in their blankets, and went to sleep.

The girls were awake by six in the morning. About seven-thirty the fat woman brought them a breakfast of oatmeal and coffee. A half hour later a tall, gangling, rustic-looking man with a prominent Adam's apple appeared. He was wearing a blue serge suit. He introduced himself as Jonathan Newley, and said he was their court-appointed attorney.

"Which one of you is Jill Munroe?" he asked.

"I am," Jill said.

"Well, you got some heavy charges against you, Miss Munroe. Illegal hitchhiking, possession of dangerous drugs for sale, resisting arrest, illegal flight, and consorting with known prostitutes."

In a high voice Jill said, "I had nothing to do with those drugs. And I didn't know they were prostitutes. All I did was hitch a ride with them. All I'm guilty of is hitchhiking."

"The information the sheriff filed says different, Miss Munroe." He peered into the other cell. "Which of you is Kelly Garrett?"

"I am," Kelly said.

"You're booked for possession of dangerous drugs for sale, conspiracy to bribe a police officer, conspiracy to solicit for prostitution, resisting arrest, and assault on a police officer."

"Let's take those one at a time," Kelly said. "The drugs were planted, and even if they weren't, we didn't have them for sale."

"The law considers a quantity of drugs over a certain amount to be for sale. Yours were over that amount."

After gazing at him through the bars for a time, Kelly said, "Okay, but what's this conspiracy nonsense? Sabrina here made the offer, not me."

"You were with Miss Duncan, and apparently you tacitly agreed. That makes it conspiracy."

"This gets rawer and rawer," Kelly said. "That assault charge is ridiculous. The sheriff has to be a big sissy to charge a girl half his size with assault just for giving him a little push."

"Constitutes assault," the lawyer said. He turned his attention to Sabrina. "Miss Duncan, you're charged with exceeding the speed limit by thirty-seven miles per hour, possession of dangerous drugs for sale, attempted bribery of a police officer, soliciting for prostitution, and lynching."

Sabrina said, "After listening to how far the other girls' objections got them, I'm not going to waste my breath. What are we stuck for, Counselor?"

Jonathan Newley smiled. "Not as much as you might think. I just talked to the deputy district attorney

prosecuting your cases. He's willing to accept plea bargains from all three of you."

"On what terms?" Kelly asked suspiciously.

"He'll drop all other charges and reduce the drug charge to simple possession if you'll plead guilty to that. And he'll request the judge to give you nothing but probation for that."

The three girls looked at each other. Sabrina said, "Better deal than I ever expected."

Kelly said, "Sounds good to me."

Jill said, "But I'm not guilty of that. Or of anything, except maybe hitchhiking."

"You don't have to cop the plea," Jonathan Newley said pleasantly. "I can have your case separated from the other two. If you get convicted on all counts, though, my guess is you'll draw at least five years."

"I'll go along with the other girls," Jill said hurriedly.

"Good," the lawyer said. "Court opens at nine. I'll see you all then."

He went away, and they watched through the open door into the office as he left the building. After the door closed behind him, Sabrina said, "I'm beginning to understand why all those girls pleaded guilty."

"Uh-huh," Kelly said. "Mr. Newley kind of puts you over a barrel, doesn't he?"

Jill said, "Now I know how Samson felt just before they threw him in the lion's den."

"That was Daniel, Jill," Sabrina told her.

Just before nine A.M. the sheriff appeared to lead them across the street to the courtroom. He left them at the defense table with their court-appointed lawyer and retreated into the audience section, where he was the only spectator.

A short, stocky man sat alone at the prosecution table. The only other person in the room was Alice Crowder, who sat at the court clerk's desk.

"Now, this is what will happen when your case is called," Jonathan Newley explained to them. "The prosecution and I will approach the bench to explain

the plea bargain to the court. The judge will tell you all to rise, and ask you to state your names and places of residence; then he'll state the charges against you and ask how you plead. You each just say, 'Guilty,' and it's all over."

The girls all nodded their understanding.

A few minutes later the judge appeared. Everyone rose, then re-seated themselves after the judge had seated himself on the bench. Their case was called.

Things happened just as their lawyer had explained. He and the prosecutor approached the bench, briefly conferred with the judge, then the judge told the girls to rise and to give their names and places of residence.

Then he said, "You were all charged with a variety of crimes, as I understand has been explained to you. The prosecution has chosen to drop all charges except possession of dangerous drugs for sale, and to reduce that to simple possession of dangerous drugs. Jill Munroe, how do you plead?"

"Guilty, your honor," Jill said.

"Kelly Garrett?"

"Guilty, your honor."

"Sabrina Duncan?"

"Guilty, sir."

They were not greatly surprised to have the judge sentence them to one year each at the Pine Parish Prison Farm for Women.

Twelve

In cynical indication of how little surprise the sentences were to Sheriff Clint, he had brought three sets of handcuffs with him. The moment the sentences were handed down, he pushed through the swinging gate in the wooden railing separating the spectator section from the business end of the courtroom and handcuffed the wrists of the three Angels behind them.

It was further evidence of how cut-and-dried the whole courtroom procedure had been that a uniformed deputy was loading their luggage and camping equipment into the trunk of the sheriff's car, which was parked just outside the courtroom. The girls were pleasantly surprised to see who the deputy was, though. They recognized him from the slide photograph of him that Bosley had shown them at the office. He was Deputy Dan Winston, the man who was supposed to be working undercover with them.

In a sarcastic tone Kelly said to the sheriff, "He must be clairvoyant to know we were going to prison, when he wasn't even in the courtroom."

Opening the rear door of the car, Sheriff Clint said, "Just get in."

Kelly got in, but Sabrina balked. "What's going to happen to my car?" she demanded to know.

"It'll be stored for you," the sheriff said. "Dollar a day storage charge."

"You mean it'll cost me three hundred and sixty-five dollars to get it out of hock after I get out of jail?" she asked, outraged.

"We'll gladly sell it for you and hold the money," the sheriff offered.

"No, thanks," Sabrina said sardonically. "Somehow I have a feeling that the money would be all used up for some other kind of charge when I got out."

She climbed into the back of the car.

Jill, still outside, looked toward Dan Winston as he brought the last of their luggage from the sheriff's substation and said to the sheriff, "What happened to your tall, silent partner?"

"Sam's day off," the sheriff said. "Dan volunteered in his place. Will you get in the car?"

Jill climbed in back with the other girls. Winston slammed the trunk lid and got in on the driver's side. Rounding the car, the sheriff got in front also.

As they pulled away, Sabrina said to the driver, "Who are you?"

"Dan Winston," he said.

"Maybe you'll listen to us, Dan. No one else has, so far. This is a frame-up. We're sentenced to the prison farm for possession of drugs that were planted on us by the man you're substituting for today."

"I know," Winston said in a tone of mock sympathy. "I've never yet delivered a prisoner to the prison who wasn't framed."

Jill said, "I was just hitchhiking. I don't even know these girls."

"What kind of county is this, anyway?" Kelly asked angrily.

Dan Winston said nothing. Smiling at the three girls over his shoulder, the sheriff said, "No kind. It's a parish. One that don't tolerate lawbreakers."

It was about eleven-thirty A.M. when they pulled up facing the prison gate. The sheriff got out of the car to carry a sheaf of admission papers over to the gate guard.

Sabrina said quickly, "Hey, Dan, you are with us, aren't you?"

He turned to smile back at them. "Completely. Which of you is which?"

"I'm Sabrina Duncan," Sabrina said. She nodded to Kelly, then to Jill. "Kelly Garrett and Jill Munroe."

"Hi, girls," Winston said.

Kelly said, "Hi," and Jill said, "How are we doing, Dan?"

"Good, so far," he said. "But be careful."

"Don't worry," Kelly said. "This isn't exactly on my list of favorite experiences."

Winston said, "I know. I don't like what's happening around here. That's why I agreed to help out."

Sabrina asked, "Aside from busting people illegally, just what is going on?"

"I'm not sure," Winston said. "They keep me on the outside of things. But I do know that Elizabeth Hunter isn't the first girl who's disappeared from the prison. In fact, she was the third."

The girls exchanged a look. Kelly said, "We heard that from Charlie. That information came from you?"

Winston nodded.

Jill said, "Stay out of drafts, Dan, and take good care of your health, huh? You're our only safety valve."

"Don't worry about me," he said. "You three are the crazy ones."

Then he abruptly faced forward again as the sheriff headed back for the car.

The guard swung open the gate as the sheriff climbed back into the car. Winston drove through and over to the administration building. As he parked, the burly uniformed woman from the admissions office whom Kelly had already met in her role of Judith Smithers came from the building and peered into the back seat of the car as the sheriff climbed from the front seat.

"Welcome to Pine Parish Prison Farm, ladies," she said with exaggerated politeness. Then she jerked open the door and said with sudden hardness, "Out of the car."

They got out and gazed around. Nearby a male guard was patrolling with a Doberman pinscher on a

leash. A two-and-a-half-ton truck with a high, canvas-covered back was just pulling up in front of one of the barracks. The driver, carrying a rifle, jumped out and went around back to let down the tailgate. He was a large, heavily muscled, coarse-featured man in uniform.

Fourteen women unloaded from the back of the truck and went into the barracks. Two were uniformed female guards, unarmed, one of whom Kelly recognized as Fran Grassley, the woman who had taken her on her guided tour of the prison. The rest, mostly young and attractive girls, were in dirt-stained denim prison uniforms and were minus makeup.

As the sheriff removed their handcuffs, Sabrina asked, "Where are they coming from?"

"The potato field," the burly woman said. "They're on their lunch break. That's probably where you cuties will be working, too. Incidentally, I'm Maxine. You girls are gonna see a lot of me."

"How delightful," Kelly murmured.

Maxine gave her a sharp look, but decided to ignore the comment. She said to the sheriff, "Now, who do we have on our guest list today?"

Pointing his finger at each one as he named her, the sheriff said, "Sabrina Duncan, Jill Munroe, and Kelly Garrett. Busted 'em outside Ridgeville for possession, and Judge Newley gave 'em a quick run-through."

"Where they from?"

Jill said, "I'm from El Paso."

In an angry voice Sabrina said, "We're from Los Angeles, and we weren't even given our rights when we were arrested."

"That right?" Maxine asked solicitously. "Well, now, girlie, this here ain't L.A. And you'll do better around here to speak when spoken to." Her voice turned menacing. "Got it?"

Sabrina made no answer.

Maxine herded the girls into the administration building. Beyond the long counter running the length

of the admissions office the same civilian clerk Kelly had previously seen sat at one of the two desks. Maxine lifted a section of the counter that was hinged, directed the girls through the opening and over to the gate in the chain-link grille at the rear of the room.

"Buzz me," she said to the civilian clerk.

The woman pressed a button on her desk, there was a loud buzz, and Maxine pushed the gate open. She held it for the girls to enter. Leaving the gate open, she unlocked three lockers in a row with a master key.

"Okay, girls," she said. "Strip to your birthday suits and leave your clothes in the lockers."

The girls looked at each other, then at the sheriff, who had followed them in and was leaning on the counter. Jill said, "In front of him?"

"Well, if you're modest, dearie," Maxine said, reaching for a draw cord that allowed an eight-foot-wide slatted screen to unroll from ceiling to floor on the inside of the chain-like grille. "I'll be back."

She went back out into the office and closed the gate behind her. Nervously the Angels began to disrobe.

Speaking in a whisper, Kelly said, "There are girls who get a thousand a week for this."

Also whispering, Jill said, "Boy, if this is how it starts, I'm sure worried about how it ends."

After peering around the end of the screen to make sure no one was on the other side of it, Sabrina said in an even lower whisper, "Just remember, the faster we find out what happened to Elizabeth, the faster Charlie can spring us out of here."

At the counter the sheriff was saying to Maxine, "The warden in?"

"Yeah, but she's in a staff meeting."

"Well, tell her we hit the jackpot this time. They look like prime candidates for the house."

"Especially the blonde," Maxine said with a small smile. "I'll try not to bruise that tender skin too much."

The sheriff frowned, not liking the inference. "You do that, Maxine. We don't want the merchandise dam-

aged." Turning toward the door, he said over his shoulder, "Tell the warden to phone me and I'll give her the dope on this shipment."

"Sure, Sheriff."

He went on out, and Maxine had the civilian clerk buzz open the gate for her again. Inside the grille she found the three girls stripped. As she rolled up the screen, the Angels glanced worriedly toward the counter, but there was now no one in the outer office except the clerk in civilian clothes, and her back was to them.

Jerking her thumb at the shower-room door, Maxine said, "All right, girls, into the next room for skin search and showers."

In the shower room there was one long shower stall with six shower heads. There was only one bar of cheap soap for the three of them.

As soon as they had all soaped and rinsed off, Maxine said, "That's enough. Turn the water off."

When the water had been turned off, Maxine tossed them each a rough towel. The girls dried quickly and stepped from the shower stall, their towels wrapped around their bodies.

Maxine was holding a pump-type insecticide sprayer. "Come over here," she ordered.

Obediently the Angels lined up before her.

"Open your towels."

The girls opened their towels. Maxine sprayed their bodies. They closed and fastened the towels about them again.

"Bend your heads down," Maxine said.

The girls bent over and had their heads sprayed. As they straightened again, Kelly asked, "How long has it been since you've been sprayed, Maxine?"

The burly woman in uniform said threateningly, "Get cute in here and you can get hurt. Understand?"

Kelly looked properly subdued.

Telling the girls to stay where they were, Maxine went out front. As she left the door open, they could hear what she said to the clerk.

"Any barracks got three vacancies?" she asked.
"Number ten," the voice of the clerk said.
"Okay, buzz Fran to come over and pick up her
three new charges."
"Sure," the clerk said.

Maxine returned to the girls. "All right, ladies," she said. "Let's go pick out your wardrobes."

Thirteen

The girls were led by Maxine through a door into a clothing room. Maxine went behind the counter and the girls lined up before it. Along the back wall were shelves piled with clothing, sorted by size.

"First, shoe sizes," Maxine said.

As each girl gave her size, Maxine reached beneath the counter and brought up a pair of tennis shoes and a pair of work boots. The girls eyed the work boots dubiously.

Then, without asking for any more sizes, Maxine began laying clothing in front of each girl. There were three sets of underwear in each stack, three pairs of cotton sox, two shapeless tan smocks, and two denim work uniforms. The Angels were not terribly thrilled by any of it.

Kelly said, "You could use a fashion coordinator in here."

Jill asked, "What do we do if this stuff doesn't fit?"

Looking her up and down, Maxine said with a look in her eyes that Jill was used to seeing only in men's eyes, "Don't worry about it, honey. I can fit you better than a tailor by just looking at you. I've always been partial to blondes."

Jill was still uneasily weighing that remark when a strapping blonde amazon of about forty wearing a guard's uniform entered the room. She was the woman who had acted as Kelly's guide when Kelly was Judith Smithers.

Maxine said, "Hi, Fran. You can add these three to your menagerie."

Fran looked them all up and down appraisingly. "Sweet stuff comes in bunches these days, huh? Okay, cuties, what you dress in for now is one of those smocks and your tennis shoes."

Sabrina had drifted off to one side and had noisily opened a closet door. The closet was crammed with lovely party dresses.

"Hey," she said. "I'd look much better in one of these."

Going over to peer in the closet also, Jill said, "They're gorgeous. What are they doing in a place like this?"

Maxine came from behind the counter fast and slammed the closet door. She growled at Jill, "It wouldn't be healthy to concern yourself with it, blondie." Then her expression softened and she said almost coyly, "But don't you worry. You need anything, you just let Maxine know."

Jill, both astonished and apprehensive, backed away from her.

Slightly nettled, Maxine said to Fran in a curt voice, "When they're dressed, take them to the barracks."

"Are there dressing rooms?" Kelly asked.

"What do you think this is, Saks Fifth Avenue?" Maxine snapped at her. "Drop your towels and get to it."

Barracks ten was the one they had seen the twelve prisoners who had unloaded from the truck enter. The twelve were still on their lunch break, and were seated disconsolately on their bunks. A number of other women who were not on that particular work detail were wandering around.

Fran led the Angels, carrying their extra clothing in

their arms, along the central aisle between two rows of bunks. As they passed a pretty but rather hard-looking girl with brassy blonde hair seated on one of the bunks, Jill dropped a work shoe.

The brassy blonde picked it up and handed it to her.

"Thanks," Jill said.

"No sweat," the blonde told her.

Fran stopped before three bunks that were not made up, but had folded sheets and blankets lying on the mattresses.

"This is where you'll bunk, girls," she said.

Kelly dropped her clothing on the center bunk, Jill set hers on the one to the left, and Sabrina took the one on the right.

"Rest up good this afternoon," Fran said, "because it's the last chance you get. Get a good night's sleep, too. You're gonna need it for a hard day's work in the potato fields. Wake-up is at five o'clock."

Sabrina said, "I never get up before ten."

"Then I'll leave you a call, sweet cakes," the amazon guard said, slamming a punch into Sabrina's ribs.

The blow doubled Sabrina over and knocked her to the floor. Fran stood over her menacingly, straddle-legged. In a hard voice she said, "I'm gonna be watching you, sweet cakes. Watching you hard."

The barracks guard stalked off to disappear through the door into her quarters at the front of the room. Kelly and Jill helped Sabrina to her feet.

"Are you crazy?" Jill whispered.

Probing her ribs and wincing with pain, Sabrina whispered back, "Just wanted to be sure she bought our cover."

Glancing around to make sure no one was near enough to over-hear them, Kelly said, "If she bought it any more, you'd need a new set of ribs."

The brassy blonde got up from her bunk and came over. "I'm Billie Adams," she said.

"Hi, Billie," Jill said, smiling at the girl. She pointed to the other two Angels in turn. "Kelly Garrett and Sabrina Duncan."

Kelly and Sabrina both smiled at her.

Billie said, "Oh, oh, here comes the moose."

They all turned to glance in the direction Billie was looking, toward the front door. The burly Maxine was striding their way up the central aisle.

"Moose?" Kelly said.

"Private name," Billie said in a low voice. "Don't ever let her hear you use it."

A rather fragile-looking red-haired girl in her early twenties was seated on the bed to the left of Jill's. Maxine stopped in front of her.

"Linda, the warden is ready to see you," the burly woman said in a friendly voice.

Linda gave a frightened nod and came to her feet. She walked toward the door with Maxine, moving with a strange mixture of reluctance and anticipation, like a nervous teenager going to meet her first date.

"So little Linda gets the big break," Billie said with a touch of envy.

"What was that all about?" Sabrina asked.

Before Billie could reply, Fran appeared in the doorway from her room and called, "Rest period's over. All aboard for the potato fields."

Sighing, Billie headed for the front door. The other girls on the potato-field detail got up from their bunks and headed that way also.

Fran was the last one out the door. Just as she started out, Sabrina thought of something and hollered, "Hey!"

Pausing, the blonde amazon looked back at her.

"We never had any lunch," Sabrina said.

"Tough, sweet cakes," the barracks guard said. "You should have arranged to get here before it was served."

She went on out.

Jill said, "How do you like that? I thought one thing you could depend on in jail was regular meals, but this is the second one we've missed in two days."

"Probably just as well," Kelly said. "I suspect we're

going to get a lot of potatoes in here, and for our figures' sakes it won't hurt to miss lunch."

The other women in the barracks began to leave also, presumably to report to other work assignments. Shortly the three Angels were the only ones left in the barracks.

They looked over their living facilities without a great deal of enthusiasm. Their bunks were narrow and the mattresses were thin. On the wall behind each bunk was a single shelf, and on the floor in front of each one was a wooden footlocker.

The girls stowed their clothes in the footlockers and began to make up their beds.

"What if we really had to spend a year here?" Jill asked. "What if Charlie suddenly dropped dead and Bosley went insane from grief and forgot we were here?"

The other two girls stopped making their beds to gaze at her.

"When things are tough, there's nothing like a cheerful companion," Kelly said.

"We should never have picked the hitchhiker up," Sabrina said. "We should have driven on by."

"You didn't pick me up," Jill said with a frown. "That was just a story for the sheriff."

Kelly and Sabrina looked at each other and burst out laughing. But they stopped when Jill emitted a triumphant laugh also and said, "I caught you! You really thought I was that dumb."

At five in the morning blonde amazon Fran Grassley awakened everyone in the barracks by blasting a whistle. At five-thirty everyone had to be dressed and lined up in front of their bunks for inspection. The Angels had been informed by Fran to dress in their work uniforms and boots.

Three of the women were missing, but that didn't seem to disturb Fran. After inspection the Angels learned that the three were kitchen help, and were excused from inspection because they had to be there at five-fifteen.

All the other women in the barracks were herded to the mess hall, where they breakfasted on oatmeal and bread and butter. At seven the Angels and twelve other women were loaded into a truck and driven to the potato fields about a quarter mile behind the prison. Among the group were both Billie Adams and the fragile-looking Linda whom Maxine had taken to see the warden the previous noon. Her last name was Oliver, the girls learned.

The big, coarse-featured driver, who was also the chief guard while they worked, they learned was Karl Stern. Fran Grassley and another uniformed woman guard also accompanied the group, but they were unarmed. Stern carried a rifle.

As the women unloaded from the truck, Karl Stern stood there with his rifle at trail position, watching them jump down to the ground. When the Angels jumped down, he eyed them with open sexual greed. His gaze shifted back and forth from one to the other, comparing them, and finally settled on Kelly. Staring at her with naked lust, he made her so uncomfortable that she nervously buttoned an additional button on her shirt.

Pointing to Kelly, Jill, Billie, and Linda, Fran said, "You four make up the first group." She pointed to Sabrina and three other girls. "You're the second." She gave Sabrina a menacing little smile. "I'm gonna be keeping a special eye on you, sweet cheeks. And I just hope you step out of line."

Turning her attention to the remaining girls, she designated four more as a team, then assigned the last three to carry baskets to the truck.

The Angels were wondering what baskets when another truck pulled up. It was a deep-bedded one with no tarp over it, driven by a man wearing denims and a sport shirt. Fran stepped up onto the rear bumper to reach inside and pull out three shovels.

She tossed a shovel to one girl in each work group. Jill was the one to get it in her group, and Sabrina was the one to get it in hers.

Jumping down to the ground, Fran said to the three girls she had designated as basket carriers, "Okay, don't just stand there. Get the baskets!"

Two of the girls scrambled up into the truck to hand down stacks of bushel baskets to the third one, who piled them on the ground.

Sabrina whispered to Kelly, "You've made a conquest. Karl can't keep his eyes off you."

"So long as he keeps his hands off me," Kelly whispered back.

That gave Karl an excuse for putting them on her. Striding over to her, he grabbed her by the left bicep.

"No talking, sweetheart," he ordered.

Kelly's impulse was to spin around facing him and knee him in the groin, but instead she made her voice frightened and innocent. "Sorry."

He gazed down at her for a long moment, his nostrils flared with desire, then abruptly released her arm and stepped aside.

Fourteen

The girls had all the baskets off the truck. They distributed one to each of the three work teams.

Fran said, "All right, everybody get to a row of potatoes and get to it!"

Kelly and Jill followed Billie and Linda, Jill carrying the shovel and Kelly carrying the basket. Sabrina followed her group carrying the shovel. Each of the groups halted at the far end of a row of potatoes.

Sabrina and Jill both looked across at the third girl with a shovel to see what she was doing. She was putting on a pair of cotton work gloves.

Sabrina said to Fran, who was standing nearby, watching her, "Where do we get gloves like she has?"

"You want gloves?" Fran asked. "You can have a pair for twenty dollars. You got twenty dollars?"

"No."

"Then start digging, or I take you back and you go to Thirteen."

"What's Thirteen?"

"Dig, or you'll find out soon enough. And I'd love to be the one to take you there."

Sabrina looked over at the other two groups. The girl with the shovel was digging the potatoes from the mounds. The others were shaking and scraping the dirt from them and dropping them in the basket. Sabrina started to dig potatoes. After watching her with a critical eye for a time, Fran seemed to be satisfied, because she moved on to check the other two groups.

When Jill and Kelly's group filled their basket, Kelly and Linda carried it to the end of the row to be picked up by the basket carriers, and brought another basket back with them.

As Kelly and Linda moved off, Jill said to Billie, "What are you in for?"

While Billie had seemed friendly enough when she came over to introduce herself in the barracks the day before, apparently she had gotten up in a bad mood, because she hadn't said a word all morning. Now she said peevishly, "I busted the head of somebody who asked nosy questions."

After a long pause Jill said, "Something eating you?"

"Just tired of digging these goddamned potatoes."

"Well, here's nosy question number two. Did you hear what Fran said to Sabrina about Thirteen?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"What's Thirteen?" Jill asked patiently.

Billie looked at her. "Nobody told you? Barracks

thirteen. It's the hole. Solitary confinement. Just pray you never see the inside of it."

Jill saw that Kelly and Linda had reached the end of the row and were returning with a fresh basket. She said hurriedly, "Look, I heard a friend of mine was doing some time in here, but I haven't seen her. If she's around, I'd like to track her down."

"Yeah? Who's that?"

"Girl named Elizabeth Hunter."

Billie studied Jill before answering. Finally she said, "Yeah, she was here."

"Was?" Jill asked. "Isn't she still?"

"I don't think so."

"Did she get out, then?"

Billie shrugged. "Who knows?"

Jill frowned. "You just said you didn't think she was still here."

Studying Jill again, Billie asked, "She a good friend of yours?"

"Yes."

After a long hesitation Billie said, "They took her to the infirmary a month ago. I haven't seen her since. They said she escaped, but there was no hole in the fence, and I don't know how you'd get over it." She glanced in the direction of Karl Stern, who was strolling toward them. "And, look, don't tell anybody I told you. They come down heavy on snitches around here."

"Thanks," Jill said. "And don't worry. All I want to do is find Elizabeth, if she's here."

Both girls fell silent as Karl went by. He gave them the once-over as he passed, particularly looking over Jill, but said nothing. Then Kelly and Linda returned with the empty basket and they all went back to work.

The first time Kelly and Linda carried a full basket to the end of the row, Kelly made one or two remarks about the dirty job they were doing, but asked no personal questions. Sensing Linda's reserve, and also that she was frightened about something, Kelly decided a careful approach was necessary.

But as they started to carry the second full basket

along the row, Kelly decided to chance a few questions. She asked casually, "What are you in for?"

"Trespassing originally," Linda said. "They added some other charges later."

"Were you trespassing?"

"I didn't think so. It was a wooded area. No signs saying it was private property. I was just camping. Then they said they found drugs on me, but it wasn't true, and that I resisted arrest, and all sorts of things."

Linda must have been arrested and tried since Sabrina did her research as Minerva Edwards, Kelly thought. She asked, "How long have you been here?"

"Just a couple of days before you came in?"

"You were tried at Rustic Pines?" Kelly asked. "They gave you a court-appointed attorney and he talked you into pleading guilty to one charge?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Same thing happened to me and my friend Sabrina, and Jill, whom we'd picked up hitchhiking. Being in here, it's all like some kind of nightmare."

Linda said hopelessly, "But what can you do?"

"Nothing, right now, I guess," Kelly said.

They reached the end of the row, set down their full basket, and picked up another. As they started back, Kelly said, "During the lunch break yesterday, just after we came in, that woman from the admissions office took you to the warden. You're not in trouble, are you?"

"No, no trouble," Linda said in an evasive tone.

The question seemed to frighten the girl. After examining her curiously, Kelly asked, "Hey, you okay?"

"Oh, yes," Linda said quickly. Then, after a pause, she said in a low voice, "Just a little scared, I guess."

"Can I help?"

The girl's tone again became hopeless. "Thanks, but I don't know whether anyone can."

Kelly decided to drop that line of questioning, at least temporarily. She said, "Linda, when we came in yesterday, we saw some beautiful party dresses in a closet in the clothing room. What are they for?"

Linda looked surprised that Kelly didn't know.
"Parties."

"Where?"

Linda looked at her strangely. "The house, of course."

"What house?"

A large hand gripped Kelly's bicep from behind and spun her around. Poking her in the stomach with his rifle barrel to emphasize the point, Karl Stern said angrily, "I told you, you're not supposed to talk while you work."

"Hey, you're hurting my arm," Kelly said in pain.

Squeezing harder, Karl said with sadistic enjoyment, "Baby, more'n that's gonna be hurting if you don't obey the rules."

Nodding consent, Kelly said, "Just let go of my arm before you break it."

Releasing his grip and lowering the rifle, he growled, "You learn some manners and you and me will get along fine. Otherwise we're gonna have problems."

Faking a smile, Kelly said, "Easy on me, okay? I'm new and . . ." She paused to give him a seductive look. ". . . you're right. I have to learn the ropes. Maybe we could get together privately."

That brought a greedy look into his eyes. Looking her up and down, he said, "Now you're getting smart."

Fran started over their way to see what the trouble was. Spotting her, Karl suddenly again became the tough, no-nonsense guard. "Get back to work," he snapped, hefted his rifle, and headed toward Sabrina's group.

Fran changed direction to head that way, too.

Looking after the big man, Linda whispered to Kelly, "Be careful of him."

"Don't worry," Kelly said with street-wise assurance.

"No, I mean *really* careful. Don't ever let him get alone with you."

"Why?"

"Billie told me he got one of the girls alone a few weeks ago. Tried to rape her, or maybe he did rape her. She got beat up so bad, they took her to the infirmary. And nobody's seen her since."

"Her name wasn't Elizabeth Hunter, was it?" Kelly asked.

"Yes, that's the name Billie told me," Linda said in surprise. "How did you know?"

"Overheard somebody talking," Kelly said vaguely.

By then they were back to the other two girls. Jill began digging up potatoes again, and they went back to work shaking and scraping the dirt off them.

At eleven-thirty Fran blew a whistle, everyone climbed back into the truck, and they were driven back to the mess hall for lunch. Lunch was stew and bread and butter. It was hardly gourmet stew, but at least it was edible.

After mess they had some time in barracks before they had to go back to work. Splitting up, the Angels individually moved among the other inmates, casually inquiring about Elizabeth Hunter. Kelly would have liked to have had more conversation with Linda Oliver, but Maxine again came for her to take her to the warden's office. By the time Linda came back, the girls were loading into the truck to return to the potato fields.

The Angels were exhausted when the day's work was over. As they washed up for dinner, all in a row at the sinks in the latrine, Jill muttered, "When that judge said hard labor, he wasn't fooling."

Kelly, at the sink between the other two girls, said philosophically, "Well, it's only for a year."

Jill and Sabrina looked at her. Sabrina said, "Sometimes I wonder about you, Kelly. When the doctor spanked you at birth, you sure he didn't accidentally spank your head instead of your bottom?"

As they lined up at the mess hall, the three of them speculated about what kind of dinners the prison kitchen served.

Kelly said hopefully, "Breakfast and lunch weren't too bad."

"How can you spoil oatmeal or canned stew?" Sabrina asked.

"They came close," Jill said. "My oatmeal was lumpy and my stew had some gristle in it."

"Still, the edible part was tasty enough," Kelly insisted. "Or maybe I was just hungry."

A middle-aged inmate in line behind them, who had been listening to the conversation, said, "You was hungry, dearie."

They reached the counter where the trays were. Above it the evening menu was posted on the wall. As they picked up their trays and utensils, Sabrina read the menu aloud:

"Caesar salad, buttered carrots, French beans, beef brochettes, potatos au gratin."

Kelly, silently reading the menu, said in a tone of surprise, "Hmm, there may be hope."

"Yeah?" Jill said. "Well, they've got a lot of nerve serving *potatoes*."

They came to the food dispensers, who were slopping food onto the metal eating trays with large ladles. The salad pan was filled with limp, brownish lettuce with oil and vinegar on it. The rest of the food looked like various kinds of mush.

As the servers filled their trays, Kelly said, "I have a feeling that the person who wrote the menu and the person who prepared the food are not one and the same."

Fifteen

The girls found a table against the wall where no one else was seated and crowded together at the far end of it, Kelly and Sabrina on one side and Jill on the other. As they began to eat, they glanced around to see if they could be overheard. None of the other inmates were nearer than ten feet, and none of the strolling guards were anywhere near.

In a low voice Sabrina said to Jill, "Have you been able to find out any more about what Billie told you?"

Jill shook her head. "Zero. When I asked around during the lunch break, no one exactly rolled the welcome wagon out for me."

Kelly said, "Then no one would admit anything more than that they saw Elizabeth taken to the infirmary after Karl attacked her?"

Jill nodded. "Billie is the only one who would admit that. The rest of them are scared to death."

Kelly said, "Karl was following me around, foaming at the mouth, all day. They ought to keep him on a leash."

"What about the date Elizabeth was in the infirmary?" Sabrina asked.

"No one could remember a specific date," Jill said. "Just that it happened about a month ago."

Sabrina said, "Around the time Christine Hunter said she was told Elizabeth had escaped."

"Right," Jill said. "Kelly, what about Linda? Could you get any more out of her about what the 'house' was?"

"I haven't had a chance. But I'm going to keep asking questions."

At about that same time Warden Velma Sorenson was calling Sheriff Clint at his home in Rustic Pines. When she got him on the phone, she said, "Sorry I couldn't get back to you earlier, Sheriff. Have you finished checking out the new ones yet?"

"Uh-huh. We lucked out. Kelly Garrett and Sabrina Duncan are A-one candidates for the house. They both had parole-officer appointment books in their stuff, you know, indicatin' they just got off parole. I phoned their probation officer in L.A. Guy named Bosley. They both have rap sheets for soliciting, but it was rollin' johns they took the felony rap for. Far as I can tell, nobody gives a damn what happens to either one."

"What about Jill Munroe?" the warden asked.

"Talked to a guy in El Paso Police Department. She's got no rap sheet as an adult, but they remember her as a wild teenager. Boy crazy, on pot, kicked out by her parents at sixteen. Shortly after, she run off with some married guy who stuck up a bunch of filling stations before they both got caught. He went to prison, she was tried as a juvenile and just got probation, seein' as how she hadn't actually helped in the robberies, but just sat in the car. They ain't seen her in recent years, but this guy heard she's been hitchhiking around the country, livin' in communes, and shakin' up with most any guy who comes along. She sure shouldn't have no objection to the house."

"Sounds good," Warden Sorenson said in a pleased voice. "I think maybe I'll approach them without any further conditioning."

After dinner the inmates had free time until the nine-o'clock lights-out, when everyone had to be in bed. The Angels showered and dressed in their shapeless smocks and tennis shoes.

As they sat on their beds conversing in low tones, Kelly said, "We ought to get a look at the infirmary records. How are we going to do that?"

"You kidding?" Jill asked. "That's easy."

Falling back on her bed, she clutched her stomach and began to groan. Other nearby inmates immediately began to gather around.

"What's the matter with her?" blonde Billie Adams asked.

"I don't know," Kelly said. "Maybe she's going to have a baby."

"It's no joke," Linda Oliver said reproachfully. "She's in pain. Somebody better tell Fran."

Sabrina ran along the aisle to the guard's quarters at the front of the building. Knocking, she pushed the door open. Fran was lying on her cot, watching a portable TV set.

"You wait for a 'Come in!'" the blonde amazon blazed at Sabrina.

"Sorry," Sabrina said meekly. "But one of the girls is having some kind of fit."

Bouncing to her feet, Fran brushed by Sabrina into the barracks room. She strode along the aisle to stand gazing down at Jill, who was writhing in simulated agony. After looking at her suspiciously for a few moments, she seemed to decide it wasn't a fake, because she went over to lift a wall phone and ask for the infirmary.

When she got an answer, she said, "Barracks ten. Get a litter over here right away. And call Doc Crowder."

Ten minutes later Jill was stretched out on a gurney in the infirmary with the burly Maxine on one side of her and a rather elderly prison nurse on the other. When the nurse felt her stomach, Jill tightened her stomach muscles. She had strong stomach muscles, and she made it rigid.

"It's no fake," the nurse said. "Her stomach's hard as a rock."

Maxine had been gazing down at the patient with considerable suspicion, but the nurse's words erased it. "Doc Crowder's on the way," she said.

Crowder, Jill thought. Another one of the interre-

lated Rustic Pines set, where everyone seemed to be either a Clint, a Newley, or a Crowder.

Dr. Crowder arrived about ten minutes later. He was a brisk, pleasant-mannered little man with a bouncy air about him. He looked a bit countrified, but he also looked capable. Jill suspected that it would be a mistake to try to fool him, as she had the nurse.

She decided not to try. Gazing up at him, she said, "Doctor, the cramps just quit."

He felt her stomach, which she kept relaxed.

"Menstruating?" he asked.

"No."

"About to?"

"No."

"Eat anything that might have disagreed with you?"

"Well, it's my first day here, Doc," Jill said. "You ever eat in the prison mess hall?"

It was his turn to say, "No."

"Everything disagreed with me."

Chuckling, the doctor said, "You may have a point. Sounds as though it was just stomach cramps. If it happens again, I'll send some pills out from town."

"Can she work tomorrow?" Maxine asked.

"No reason why not."

While the doctor was examining Jill, the elderly nurse had been making out a chart and entering on it the patient's temperature, blood pressure, and pulse, which she had taken while waiting for the doctor to arrive. She handed it to him.

As he studied it, she asked, "Will you need me any more, Doctor?"

"Why?" he asked jokingly. "Got a hot date?"

She chuckled. "My grandson's birthday. And I'm on overtime."

"Go ahead, Gert," he said. "I'll put the chart away."

The nurse left, accompanied by Maxine, who had to unlock the gate in the chain-link fence to let her out. After making an entry on the chart, the doctor went over to a filing cabinet and put it away.

Maxine came back into the room and said, "I'll let you out, Doc."

Nodding, the doctor went out. Following after him, Maxine paused in the doorway to say over her shoulder in a low voice, "Stay put, cutie. If I see your head outside the door, I'll knock it off."

Jill said nothing. Maxine went on out and pulled the door closed behind her. Immediately Jill jumped off the gurney and ran over to the file cabinet. Pulling open the same drawer she had seen the doctor file her chart in, she located the *H*'s and flipped through them until she found one labeled "Hunter, Elizabeth." After quickly examining the chart, she put it back where she had found it and closed the cabinet drawer.

On a small table next to the door was an open ledger used as a patient in-and-out log. Jill was heading for it when she heard Maxine returning. She had barely gotten herself back on the gurney when the big woman opened the door and came in.

"Okay, cutie," Maxine said. "Doc says you're all right, so come on, let's go."

Jill swung herself off the gurney, then staggered slightly, faking being still a bit woozy. She started past the table with the log on it.

Grabbing her arm, Maxine said, "Wait a minute, blondie." She pointed to the ledger. "Sign out before you leave."

"I didn't sign in," Jill said.

"You came in on a stretcher, stupid," Maxine said testily. "Fran signed you in. But the rule is, if the patient is able, she signs herself out."

Jill jerked her arm free of Maxine's grip, deliberately lost her balance, and careened into the little table, knocking the ledger to the floor. She stood looking down at it.

Maxine said irritably, "Pick it up."

Jill just stood there. The door opened and Fran came in.

"She ready to go?" the blonde amazon asked. Then

she saw the tense situation and said to Maxine, "Need any help?"

Apparently Maxine considered any answer to that beneath her dignity, because she simply ignored the question. In a deadly voice she said to Jill, "If you don't pick it up, we'll be calling the doctor back here for you. Only this time it won't be just for stomach cramps."

Jill gazed at her defiantly for a moment, but when the big woman's nostrils began to flare, she quickly stooped to pick up the ledger. It had fallen facedown, open. Jill picked it up so that the book closed. She began thumbing through the pages.

Maxine didn't notice for the moment, because she had turned her attention to Fran. "After she signs out, take her back to the barracks," she said. Then she saw Jill flipping the book's pages and demanded, "What do you think you're doing?"

Jill had stopped at a page where there was a sign-in entry for "Hunter, Elizabeth," giving the date and time of admittance. She flipped one more page, then thrust the book at Maxine.

"Just getting back to the right page," she said. "But here, you do it."

Grabbing the ledger, Maxine turned it to the current date and set it on the table in front of Jill.

Giving her a cocky grin, Jill said, "Why, thank you."

Maxine glared at her. Jill picked up a pen attached to a chain on the table, signed her name in the sign-out column, and dropped the pen back on the table. Maxine picked it up and entered the time. Fran grabbed Jill's arm and led her out, with Maxine trailing after them.

Back in the barracks Fran shoved Jill toward her bunk. As Jill sank to a seated position on its edge, the amazon eyed Kelly and Sabrina.

"Get a good night's sleep, girls," she said. "You're gonna need it."

Kelly said to Sabrina, "I think this is where I came in."

Sabrina said in a bored tone, "We heard the speech before, Fran."

Jill said, "But your concern for us is really touching."

Fran glared from one to the other, considering which to blast first, then decided to ignore it. Swinging her back to them, she stalked off to her own room.

Sixteen

As soon as Fran disappeared into her room, Jill said in a low voice, "Elizabeth was signed into the infirmary by Fran, and there's a chart on her. But get this: She never signed out." She rubbed her arm where Fran had gripped it. "And they're very serious around here about people signing out."

"What did the chart say?" Sabrina asked.

"Elizabeth was treated for bruises and abrasions by the same doctor who examined me. But that's all it said."

Kelly said, "When Fran took me on a tour of this place in my buck-toothed disguise, she said Elizabeth cut the screen out of the infirmary window with a scalpel someone had left lying around, and made it over the fence. She sounded as though she believed it. It's at least possible that Elizabeth actually escaped and is still at large and we're wasting our time."

Sabrina said, "No, we're not, even if she is still at large. She's a fugitive, if she's alive, and the only way to clear her is to bust this racket wide open."

Big Maxine came into the barracks and walked

down the central aisle. Everyone in the barracks stopped talking to watch her. The big woman stopped before Billie Adams's bunk.

"Okay, Billie, tonight's the night," she said. "On your feet."

The brassy blonde got to her feet, smiling. Maxine moved on to the fragile-looking Linda Oliver's bed. "All right, Linda, this is it."

Linda smiled also, but weakly, as she came to her feet. Her face paled noticeably.

Maxine continued along to the three beds occupied by the Angels, halting before Jill's. "Let's go, ladies," she said, not unpleasantly.

"Where?" Jill asked.

In a slightly sharper tone the big woman said, "Just get on your feet and come along."

The girls all got off their bunks. Maxine headed back up the aisle toward the door. Linda and Billie fell in behind her. Jill, Sabrina, and Kelly all looked at each other, then shrugged and followed after the others.

It was now about eight o'clock, and the attack dogs were not yet patrolling the grounds. Maxine led the five prisoners across to the administration building, buzzed them through the gate in the chain-link grille, and took them on through the shower room into the clothing room. She opened the door into the closet where the party dresses hung.

"You've got a half hour to get ready, ladies," she announced.

"Ready for what?" Kelly asked.

"You're going to a party. And believe me, it's an invitation you can't refuse." She indicated the dresses. "They're all arranged by size, smallest sizes at the front." She pointed to a shelf above the dresses, on which there was a array of silver evening slippers, all in the same style, of soft leather and with no heels. "Those are arranged by size too, smallest on the left." Maxine left the room. Billie chose a pair of slippers in her size, then selected a silver party gown. After

holding it up on front her herself, she laid it on the counter and began to undress.

Linda chose next, picking a pink, fluffy gown. Then Jill picked a bright green one with a hip-high slit on the right side of the ankle-length skirt. Kelly chose a skin-tight velvet gown in light blue, and Sabrina took an equally clinging one in gold.

After stepping into her pink dress, Linda gazed down at herself in consternation. "My bra shows," she said.

The other girls all stopped dressing to look at her. She still had on one of the cheap cotton bras furnished by the prison.

Kelly said gently, "These gowns aren't designed for bras, Linda."

Linda gazed at her wide-eyed. "But everything will show!"

"Not everything," Billie told her. "Just 'most everything. But that's what the dress designers had in mind when they created these little numbers. Get that silly thing off, kid."

Linda pulled the shoulder straps of her gown down over her shoulders long enough to remove the bra.

All five of the gowns were low-cut and backless. When they were dressed, the girls went into the shower room to examine themselves in the mirrors. They found a variety of toiletry items and cosmetics laid out on the shelf above the sinks there, including a number of brands of perfume and a whole shoeboxful of lipsticks in varying shades, unused. The lipsticks were of good quality, but were only samples in plastic tubes, designed to be used only a few times, then thrown away.

The girls made up their faces and dabbed on perfume. Maxine appeared just as they finished. She had changed from her uniform into a masculine-looking tweed suit with a skirt falling just below her knees. The jacket was cut like a man's, with notched lapels, and under it she wore a man's white shirt and a dark necktie.

She was carrying a large leather purse and five small silver evening bags that matched the silver slippers. As she distributed the latter, she said, "Nothing in there but combs and tissues. Pick the shade lipstick you want from the collection there, and that's it. You carry nothing else."

The girls chose tubes of lipstick and dropped them into their evening bags. Maxine looked all five of them over critically, then nodded approval.

"It's warm enough so you won't need wraps," she said. "Okay, ladies, let's go."

She led the way back through the gate in the grille, which this time she unlocked from inside with a key, and outdoors. The same truck that took them back and forth from the potato fields was there, and Karl Stern was leaning against the lowered tailgate. Tonight he was dressed in a dark blue suit, a shirt, and a necktie.

When the girls and Maxine were loaded into the back of the truck, Karl raised the tailgate. Maxine instructed the girls to sit well forward, just behind the cab, and seated herself clear at the back, on the bench running along the right-hand side. As Karl climbed into the cab, she removed a thirty-eight-caliber snub-nosed detective special from her purse. Sufficient light came into the tarp-covered truck from the prison flood-lights for the girls to see the revolver clearly.

"Tonight I'm your guard," Maxine announced. "No prisoner's ever escaped from me, although a couple have tried. Anybody makes a break while we're outside the prison gates is gonna get a slug between her pretty shoulderblades. Understand?"

There was a general murmur of understanding. Maxine dropped the revolver back into her purse and snapped the purse closed.

The truck drove through the prison gate and along a country road for a couple of miles. Then it parked, and Karl came around to lower the tailgate.

When they got out, the girls saw that they were parked in a barnyard next to a large, two-story farm-

house of mid-Victorian architecture. A half dozen late-model cars were also parked in the barnyard.

Maxine led the way around to the front of the house. Karl followed behind the girls, watching them closely.

There was a wide, railed porch running all across the front and halfway along the far side of the house. Maxine opened the front door without either knocking or ringing, and led the girls into an entry hall where a broad wooden stairway leading upward was opposite the door. Twin archways led either way off the entry hall, the one to the left into a living room, the one to the right into a dining room. The rooms were exquisitely furnished with Louis XIV furniture and thick Oriental rugs.

Through the archways the girls could see seven persons in each room. In the living room Warden Velma Sorenson was seated in an antique thronelike chair. Except for Kelly, who had met the woman in her role as Judith Smithers, the Angels had seen her only once before, at that morning's inspection, and then she had worn a tailored pantsuit. Now she wore a long red and white hostess gown that, with her jet-black hair and thin face, gave her a faintly Oriental look. She was conversing with three couples standing in a semicircle before her with drinks in their hands. The women were all young and pretty, wore party gowns, and had the standard matching silver evening bags and slippers. The Angels recognized them as prison inmates, but from another barracks. The men were all middle-aged and wore conservative business suits. In the dining room there were five more middle-aged men in business suits, standing around the dining-room table with drinks in their hands. A black bartender was on duty behind a small corner bar, and a uniformed maid was setting out hors d'oeuvres on the table.

Maxine said, "Wait here," and went through the left-hand archway toward the warden.

The men in the dining room showed instant interest

in the newly arrived girls. A couple started that way, but halted when Karl held up a cautioning palm. Karl moved over to the dining-room archway and spoke to the two men in a low voice.

Billie and Linda had halted a few feet away to gape at an oil painting hanging on the entry-room wall, so that for the moment the Angels were alone. Jill whispered, "Why do I suddenly feel like a Christian going into the arena?"

"Just keep your cool," Sabrina whispered back. "It can't be that bad."

"Uh-huh," Kelly said. "No worse than skydiving without a parachute."

Maxine was in conversation with the warden, and the three couples were drifting away in the direction of the dining room. The girls threw the new arrivals polite smiles as they passed through the entry hall, and the men carefully looked them over.

Maxine came back over and gestured to Billie and Linda. "You two first."

The two girls followed her over to the thronelike chair, where the warden greeted them with a smile. After a brief exchange she dismissed them, and Billie and Linda headed for the dining room. Maxine signaled for the Angels to come over.

As they approached their hostess, Velma Sorenson said cordially, "How nice of you to join us, girls."

"Did we have a choice?" Kelly asked.

The warden said chidingly, "Miss Garrett, you shouldn't be so cynical."

"I didn't used to be," Kelly said. "Until I was busted and sent here on a frame-up."

"I wouldn't know about that, dear," the warden said. "Your arrest is none of my business. But I am responsible for you while you're incarcerated."

Sabrina said in a hopeful tone, "And you could be responsible for recommending our early release."

"That is very true," Warden Sorenson said with a smile. She turned to Jill. "Maxine tells me you made a

remarkable recovery at the infirmary before Dr. Crowder even arrived. Stomach cramps?"

"An allergy, Warden. I'm allergic to working in potato fields."

The warden's smile widened. "You're right. You shouldn't have to work in the fields. None of you should."

Jill let her eyes widen. With deliberately exaggerated innocence she asked, "You mean there's a way we can avoid it?"

Sabrina said, "I think that's why we're here, Jill."

"You're here to enjoy yourselves for the evening," Warden Sorenson said. "So relax and do just that." After a pause she added, "Maxine tells me you're smart girls. I like smart girls, because they can understand the benefits to be derived from co-operating at my little parties."

"What kind of benefits?" Kelly asked.

"One benefit is that after three parties, you'll no longer have to work in the fields." She smiled again. "Now go join the others. We can discuss the future benefits later."

Seventeen

Chief Sheriff's Deputy Sam Crowder was working late in his office. He had just turned his desk lamp off and risen from his desk when he heard the door of the sheriff's office adjoining his open and click shut again. Crowder waited for the light to go on in the other office.

Instead a flashlight beam played over the desk. Crowder tiptoed to the open door to peer in.

A dark figure moved behind the desk and sank into the swivel chair. Reflected glow from the flashlight beam as it played over the desk top illuminated the prowler's face enough for Crowder to see that it was Deputy Dan Winston. He watched in astonishment as Winston went through all the papers on the sheriff's desk, then began searching the desk drawers.

The bottom drawer was locked, but Winston got it open with a picklock. That was probably how he had gotten the office door open too, Crowder thought, because he was sure the sheriff would have locked it when he left for the day.

After thoroughly searching the drawer, the deputy relocked it, then rose from the swivel chair and went over to a file cabinet. Sam Crowder stood in the doorway between the two rooms and silently watched as Winston made a thorough check of the files.

Finally Winston returned to reseat himself behind the desk and dialed a phone number. Crowder counted the number of digits dialed. There were eleven, which meant it had to be a long-distance number. Crowder tiptoed over to his own desk and lifted his extension phone. He didn't seat himself but merely stood alongside the desk.

The number was still ringing when he put the receiver to his ear, but then a male voice said, "You have reached Charles Townsend Investigations. This is a tape recording. Office hours are nine to five, Monday through Friday. However, in emergency you may phone John Bosley at 479-9937. If it is not an emergency, you have thirty seconds to record a message after the beep sounds."

Crowder heard the click of Winston hanging up, and broke his connection also. He waited with his finger depressing the button to see if the deputy was going to call the emergency number.

Again there was the sound of eleven digits being dialed. Crowder waited until he figured the other number had started to ring before releasing the button,

because he knew a number wouldn't ring when an extension was off the hook.

The other phone was ringing, but it cut off in the middle of a ring. The same male voice that had been on the recording said, "Hello."

"Dan Winston, Bosley."

"Oh, hello. How are things going?"

"Good and bad. I helped the sheriff deliver your three under-cover agents to the prison yesterday morning, but I haven't heard from them yet. They must have been accepted at face value, because if they had blown their cover, I would have heard. So I guess that's good. But I'm in the sheriff's office now, and I just made a thorough check of his personal papers. There isn't a shred of evidence to indicate what's going on out there, which is bad."

"Well, keep plugging," Bosley said. "Rome wasn't built in a day. Have you learned anything more at all about Elizabeth Hunter?"

"No. Hopefully the girls will. That's what they're in there for."

"Yes. All right, Dan, I'll relay your report to Charlie. Anything more?"

"Not right now. Good night, Bosley."

"Good night, Dan."

Crowder hung up, leaned down to slide open his bottom desk drawer, and groped into it in the dark for a thick metal tube with holes drilled in it. Drawing his service revolver, he screwed the silencer onto the barrel and took two catlike steps to the connecting door.

He flicked the light switch next to the door in the sheriff's office. The overhead light went on just as Dan Winston reached for the knob of the door into the hall. The young deputy turned with a startled look on his face.

"Hi, Dan," Crowder said in a friendly voice, but with his face remaining as expressionless as always.

Closing the distance between them to two feet, he aimed the silenced gun at Winston's forehead and

squeezed the trigger. There was a popping sound, and a purple-ringed hole appeared in the center of the forehead.

Crowder caught the dead man as he pitched forward, eased him to the floor, and quickly grabbed a newspaper from a nearby table to place beneath his head. Then he locked the door into the hallway, turned out the light, and went back into his own office. He closed the connecting door behind him.

Turning on his desk lamp, Crowder sat at his desk, unscrewed the silencer, and replaced it in his bottom desk drawer. After reholstering his gun, he dialed the sheriff's home number in Rustic Pines.

When Sheriff Clint answered, the chief deputy said, "Sam, Cousin. We've got a problem."

"What, Sam?"

"Those three girls you and Dan Winston delivered to the prison yesterday are plants. They're undercover agents for some outfit called Charles Townsend Investigations, here to investigate the disappearance of Elizabeth Hunter. Wasn't that probation officer you phoned in Los Angeles named John Bosley?"

"Yes."

"Well, he's no probation officer. He works for Townsend Investigations. I just listened in on an illuminating conversation between him and Dan Winston."

"Dan Winston?" the sheriff said sharply.

"Yeah, we had a Judas in the department."

After a considerable pause, the sheriff said tentatively, "*Had, Sam?*"

"Uh-huh, Cousin. Don't worry about him. All you got to do is take care of them three little chippies at the prison."

"I'll get on that right away, Sam," the sheriff said grimly. "Thanks for the tip."

"Well, it was my neck, too," Crowder said. "But you're welcome."

Hanging up, he went over to peer out into the hallway. At the end of the hall to the right was a door leading to the booking and information desks. At an

equal distance in the opposite direction was a fire exit giving onto an alley. There was an office door on either side of the corridor between it and Crowder's office, and another directly across the hall from him, but all three were closed and locked for the night.

With an eye over his shoulder on the door leading to the booking and information desks, Crowder moved quietly to the fire exit. He let the door close on a match folder so that he could get back in that way, then walked along the alley to the parking lot alongside the building and got into his personal car. Driving it up the alley to park alongside the fire exit, he opened the trunk, left it open, and went back inside.

In the sheriff's office he stooped to lift the body in a fireman's carry and carried it outdoors, again placing the match folder so that he could get back in by the fire exit. He dumped the body into the open car trunk and closed the trunk lid. Slipping under the steering wheel, he backed the car onto the parking lot again and returned it to its original slot.

Returning to the sheriff's office via the fire exit, he carried the bloody newspaper on which Dan Winston's head had lain into the sheriff's private washroom, ripped it into shreds, and flushed the pieces down the stool.

Then he turned out the lights in both his and the sheriff's office, locked his office door from the outside, and left the building by the front way. Both the night man on the booking desk and the one on the information desk wished him good night. He returned the wish.

As the Angels headed from the living room across the entry hall toward the dining room, Jill asked, "What do we do now?"

"We try to be witty and charming," Kelly said.

Grinning, Sabrina said, "And remember our karate training."

- Billie and Linda had been taken over by two of the men in the dining room, which left only three. They converged on the Angels.

A stocky man with a reddish moon face, already about half drunk, zeroed in on Jill. "Hi," he said with a vacuous grin. "I'm Harold Johnson."

"Jill Munroe," she said, linking her arm in his and steering him toward the bar. "What we need is a drink."

A rather skinny, gaunt-faced man in a three-hundred-dollar suit picked Kelly. Giving her an invitational smile, he said, "I'm Jack Crimmins, gorgeous. Like to make music together?"

"Kelly Garrett," she said, taking his arm and steering him toward the bar also. "I'd rather have a drink now and make music later."

That left the third man—short, plump, baldheaded, and in his late forties—for Sabrina. He took her arm to lead her toward the bar.

"Henry Kerringer," he said in the hearty voice of a perennial backslapper. "Sort of like Henry Kissinger, except he has more hair." He brayed with laughter at his own joke. "What's your name, sweets?"

"Sabrina Duncan," she told him.

Jill and Harold Johnson, she with a weak Scotch and water, he with a fresh bourbon on the rocks, drifted into the living room. En route they passed Velma Sorenson, who was heading for the hors d'oeuvres table. The warden gave them a gracious smile.

"What's your line, Harold?" Jill asked.

"Medical supplies," he said. He made a sweeping gesture. "I sell medical supplies through the whole parish and two others. Including right here."

"You mean at the prison?" she asked.

"At the prison," he confirmed importantly. "Every pill you get out of that infirmary was put in there by me."

"How marvelous," Jill said, squeezing his bicep. "Such important work. That how you came to know the warden?"

"Uh-huh. You wanna go upstairs?"

"Let's socialize a little first," Jill suggested.

Kelly and the skinny Jack Crimmins drifted into

the living room also, she with a weak Scotch and water, he with a gin and tonic.

"What do you do for a living, Jack?" Kelly asked.

"Linen supplies, honey. All the sheets and pillow-cases and towels and such stuff at the prison come from the Crimmins Linen Supply Service."

"My, that must be interesting work," Kelly said admiringly.

"It's a living," he said. "But let's talk about you. Do you like me?"

What he meant was, let's talk about him from a different viewpoint, she thought. Smiling into his face, she said, "I think you're a doll."

Sabrina and Henry Kerringer drifted into the living room also, Sabrina, like the other two Angels, playing it safe with a weak Scotch and water, her plump companion carrying a double Scotch on the rocks. Sabrina didn't have to ask him what he did for a living. He spewed forth autobiographical material without prompting. He was the meat supplier for the prison, he informed her. Then in rapid order he passed out the information that he was married but hadn't been working at it very hard for the past fifteen years, and he had two daughters and a grandson.

"Been married thirty years," he said. "Since I was eighteen and my wife was sixteen. Got her pregnant on a hayride and had to marry her. But she's not a bad old bag. Know what my problem is?"

"What?" Sabrina asked.

"My wife understands me."

He emitted his braying laugh.

Eighteen

By ten P.M. the party was in full swing. Billie Adams and the three girls who were not from the Angels' barracks had all disappeared upstairs with their male companions. And the other four men were becoming increasingly impatient.

Kelly saw Jill heading for the powder room and broke away from her skinny linen supplier in order to meet her there. Locking the door, Kelly leaned her back against it and expelled a deep breath.

"You getting the same kind of workout I am?" she asked.

Jill shook her head. "I saw you fighting off the roving hands. Harold is too drunk to paw. I'm going to take him upstairs."

"Upstairs!" Kelly said with raised eyebrows.

"Don't worry. He's too drunk to do anything but talk. And he's beginning to do that. He knows something about Elizabeth Hunter, Kelly. He furnishes the prison's medical supplies, and he saw her in the infirmary that evening."

"He furnishes the prison's medical supplies?" Kelly said reflectively. "Mine supplies its linens. Suppose there's some connection?"

"I wouldn't know," Jill said. "But we'd better get back before the moose comes looking for us."

They returned to the party, and shortly afterward Kelly saw Jill leading the staggering Harold Johnson up the stairs. At the same moment she saw Linda's companion pull her by the hand from the dining room into the entry hall and toward the stairs. Linda, look-

ing frightened, said something to him; he released her hand and she headed for the bar. Kelly guessed that she had bartered for just a little more time by suggesting one last drink before going upstairs, and he had agreed.

Kelly and Jack Crimmins were in the living room, glasses in their hands, his arm about her waist. Occasionally his hand strayed upward or downward, and she playfully slapped it. Instead of resenting the slaps, he seemed to be enjoying the game.

Wanting to talk to Linda, Kelly slipped from her companion's encircling arm, took the glass from his hand, and said, "Mind if I freshen our drinks?"

"As long as you don't let me forget where I left off," Crimmins leered at her.

Giving him a sexy smile, she said, "Promise."

Linda was nervously waiting for the bartender to mix her drinks when Kelly got to the bar. Kelly set down her empty glasses. Linda turned to her with a frightened look on her face.

"Having fun, Kelly?" she asked in a shaky voice.

"Not much," Kelly said candidly. "Linda, was this why you were called to the warden's office twice?"

Linda hesitated, then nodded. "Now do you understand why I didn't want to talk about it?"

"Not quite."

Linda's eyes became moist. "Well, I don't know how you feel about being a prostitute—"

When she let it trail off, Kelly said quietly, "The same way you do, Linda."

"Then why—" She let it trail off again.

Kelly gave her an encouraging smile. "Trust me, Linda. I'm on your side. I can't tell you any more right now, but just trust me."

The bartender set Linda's two drinks on the bar and gave Kelly an inquiring look.

Indicating the two glasses she had set on the bar, Kelly said, "Gin and tonic, heavy on the gin, and a very weak Scotch and water."

As the bartender began making her drinks, Kelly

said to Linda, "The man I'm with is from New Orleans. Says he supplies all the prison's linens. And Jill's man brings the prison's medical supplies. What about the other men here?"

"They're all prison suppliers, if that's what you mean." Linda picked up her drinks. "I've got to get back."

Kelly stopped her by putting a hand on her arm. "Linda, no matter what happens, you've got a friend. And I'm going to help you get out of here."

Linda gazed at her for a long moment, the hope in her eyes struggling to become belief. It finally did. "Thanks, Kelly," she said, devoutly, then hurried off to rejoin her male companion.

Sabrina moved in next to Kelly and set two glasses on the bar. Speaking quietly, she asked, "You get anything yet?"

"You mean besides multiple bruises?"

Sabrina grinned. "Don't feel like the Lone Ranger. The one I'm with has hands like a linebacker for the Dallas Cowboys."

Kelly glanced at the bartender, saw he wasn't listening, and said, "Looks like Warden Sorenson's got her own private bordello going, freshly stocked with rotating bodies from the prison farm. You know every male guest here is a supplier of some kind for the prison?"

Sabrina looked at her curiously. "I know mine is. Furnishes all the meat."

"Mine furnishes all the linens, Jill's all the medical supplies. And Linda says they're *all* suppliers of some kind or other."

After considering this, Sabrina said softly, "Sex for prison suppliers in exchange for supplies, payoffs, and kickbacks."

"Uh-huh," Kelly said. "And the good warden pockets free and clear whatever cash the state pays the prison for purchase orders."

The bartender set Kelly's drinks on the bar and asked Sabrina what she wanted.

"Weak Scotch and water and a double Scotch on the rocks," Sabrina told him.

As he started to mix her drinks, Sabrina said barely audibly, virtually in Kelly's ear, "The attorney general is going to eat it all up. But I haven't been able to come up with a thing on Elizabeth Hunter. Have you?"

"No, but Jill has."

Glancing about, Sabrina said in her normal voice, "Where is she?"

"She found a talker, and a bedroom to take him to."

Upstairs Jill steered Harold Johnson into one of the bedrooms and closed and locked the door. The bedroom had been dark when they entered, but Jill flicked on the overhead light. Staggering, the stocky Johnson gripped the edge of a dresser to keep from falling.

"What you need is a back rub to straighten you out," Jill told him. "Give me your suit coat."

He allowed her to help him out of his coat, and clung to the dresser again as she hung it over the back of a chair. She loosened and removed his necktie, then unbuttoned his shirt and helped him off with it. Leading him over to the bed, she had him sit. Immediately he flopped onto his back. After removing his shoes, she gripped his ankles, swiveled him around to lie lengthwise on the bed, and rolled him over on his stomach.

The slit in the side of her skirt allowed her to push it aside so that she could straddle his hips. She began to give him a back rub.

"How's that feel, Harold?" she asked.

"Um—wonderful," he said drowsily.

She didn't want him to go to sleep. She kneaded his shoulder muscles roughly.

"Hey!" he said. "Not so hard."

Her fingers became more gentle. "Tell me more about Elizabeth Hunter, Harold," she said.

"Little Liz? Cute. Jus' didn't know how to play the game, I guess."

"The infirmary, isn't that where you said you saw her last?"

His voice was becoming increasingly thick. "Yup. I was delivering medical supplies. Told you that was my line, didn't I?"

"Uh-huh, you did. But you said this was at night. Or at least in the evening. What were you doing making a delivery at that time?"

"Emergency order. Run out of insulin, and a couple of inmates were diabetics. Hadda go back the next day to deliver my regular order, too."

"I see. How beat up was Elizabeth when you saw her?"

"Not that bad. Jus' body bruises, nothin' busted, 'cording to what the nurse on duty said. She was out cold, but the nurse said that was jus' shock. Sort of scared into unconsciousness. Guess that's why she tried to escape. Scared."

"She only tried to escape?" Jill asked. "She didn't make it?"

"Oh, she got over the fence all right. But nobody escapes from that prison permanent. Too far from any town big enough to get lost in, and they got the dogs."

"Then they caught her?"

"Guess so," he said drowsily, suddenly on the verge of sleep. "All I know is, next day when I was deliv-erin' my regular order, the sheriff and his chief deputy and Karl Stern were jus' takin' off with dogs and with rifles." His voice became barely audible. "If they got her, she's dead now. Count on it. 'Specially that Karl. Mean. A killer."

Jill began to ease herself off the bed. She got her feet on the floor when he suddenly grabbed her wrist.

"Where's my pretty baby goin'?" he asked in a slurred voice.

Freeing her wrist, Jill patted him on the head. "Just going to get us another drink. Now you just rest, Harold, and mama will be right back."

Moving over to the door, she unlocked it, then looked back at the man on the bed. His mouth fell

open and he began to snore. Switching off the light, she opened the door, peered out into the upper hallway, saw no one, and went out and pulled the door closed behind her.

Jill moved along the corridor in the direction away from the stairs, trying bedroom doors. She found three locked from inside. The fourth was unlocked, and she cautiously opened it. By the light from the hallway she could see it was unoccupied. Flicking on the overhead light, she looked around for a phone.

There was none. Since there had been none in the other bedroom, either, she suspected she wouldn't find one on this floor. It was reasonable to assume that Velma Sorenson wouldn't care to make phones available to her party-girl prisoners, since at least some of them had been framed into prison.

Hearing someone ascending the stairs, she ducked into a bathroom at the end of the hall, then cautiously peered out. Linda Oliver and her male companion appeared, the man walking a step ahead of her and pulling her along by the hand. They disappeared into the bedroom Jill had just checked for a phone.

After considering, Jill crossed the hall, lightly rapped on the door, and opened it. The light was on and the man was removing his suit coat.

Giving him an apologetic smile, Jill said, "Kelly wants to see you downstairs, Linda. It's important."

Linda immediately scooted past her, her face registering relief. Jill said in a reassuring tone to the man, "She'll only be a minute. Make yourself comfortable."

Backing out, Jill pulled the door closed behind her. Linda was heading toward the stairs. Jill called softly, "Linda."

Turning, the girl came back.

"Kelly doesn't want anything," Jill said. "I just wanted to give you a chance to get out of that, if you want. Now you can either go back in, or go downstairs and lock yourself in the powder room."

"That's not a hard decision," Linda said, heading for the stairs again.

Jill headed the other way. She had spotted one more door at the end of the hallway, and decided to check it.

It turned out to open onto a rear stairway. She flicked on a light at the top of the stairs and went down them, emerging into a kitchen. Peering out the kitchen door, she saw that it gave onto the rear of the corridor that went past the front stairs. Directly across from her was an open door through which she could dimly make out a desk by the light from the hall.

Slipping across the hall, she found a light switch alongside the door, and closed the door before she turned it on. She was in a book-lined study, she saw, and there was a telephone on the desk.

Crossing to lift the phone, she dialed the operator.

When the operator answered, Jill said, "Operator, I need to talk to the Pine Parish Sheriff's Office. It's an emergency."

"I'll ring for you," the operator said.

Jill heard the phone ringing, then a male voice said, "Sheriff's Office, Deputy Klinger."

"Deputy Winston, please," Jill said.

"Hold on. He's on duty, but I haven't seen him around for a while. I'll see if I can find him."

A large hand suddenly snaked past Jill from behind, jerked the phone from her hand, and hung it up. She spun, heart in her throat, to face Sheriff Burton Clint. His pistol was leveled at her stomach.

With a wolfish grin on his face he said, "If you was plannin' on Deputy Dan helpin' you, girl, forget it. We caught on to his game, and he's resigned. Permanently."

Nineteen

The sheriff ordered Jill to turn her back and put her hands behind her. The cuffs clicked into place. Holstering his gun, Sheriff Clint took her arm and dragged her up the hall to the front part of the house.

Warden Sorenson was at the front door, ushering out thin Jack Crimmins and the baldheaded Henry Kerringrider. Both men looked somewhat bewildered by the bum's rush they were getting.

Jill heard the warden say apologetically, "Sorry, gentlemen, but for security reasons I have to ask you to leave. We don't know how many others are involved in this escape plot, and until we find out, it's best that everyone not connected with the prison get out of the area."

"But the other guys are still all upstairs," Crimmins protested.

"They won't be long," Warden Sorenson assured them. "I'll make this up to you, Jack. All of you. There'll be another party next week."

She cut off any further protest by closing the door. As Jill and the sheriff went by, she followed them into the living room.

Kelly and Sabrina were also handcuffed, with Karl and Maxine standing guard over them. After looking all three Angels over with a disapproving expression on her face, the warden turned to the sheriff.

"I sent the bartender and maid home," she said. "I'll break things up upstairs and get the men out of here, and will have Karl and Maxine get the other women back to the prison. Meantime, if you'll take

these three over to Thirteen, I'll join you there soon as we get everyone out of here."

"Okay," the sheriff agreed.

Warden Sorenson turned to the Angels. "You've been very bad girls. Not smart girls at all. I guess that's my mistake for trying to treat you so well."

Karl said, "Crimmins and Kerringer said all these chickies did all night was ask questions."

"Questions about what?" the warden asked.

"Elizabeth Hunter—and our operation."

The warden gave the sheriff a frowning look of inquiry. He said, "I'll explain it all when we get over to Thirteen." He nodded at Jill. "Blondie here was tryin' to phone our dear departed Deputy Dan when I got to her."

Velma Sorenson turned her frown on Jill. "Is that right, Jill?"

"I was calling my attorney," Jill said.

"Am I supposed to believe that?"

"You can believe that I want to get out of here. Remember? I hate potatoes."

The sheriff said, "Warden, they're all three undercover agents for a Los Angeles outfit called Charles Townsend Investigations, and they were sent here to investigate the disappearance of Elizabeth Hunter. You're wastin' your time questionin' them here. Let's hold it until we get them over to Thirteen, where there's better questionin' facilities."

The Angels looked at each other, both nonplussed at his knowledge of who they were and apprehensive at the implication that some torture was in store for them.

Kelly made an effort to get them out of it. She said in a tone of bewilderment, "Where did you get that strange information, Sheriff? I've heard of Charlie Townsend. Everyone in the L.A. area has. But I'll swear on the Bible I've never even met him."

Karl asked, "Then why were you asking questions about Elizabeth Hunter?"

"I never met her either."

"Come on," the sheriff said irritably, gesturing for the Angels to precede him from the room. "This is gettin' us nowhere."

Warden Sorenson followed them to the front door. Just before closing it after them, she said to the sheriff, "I'll be along as soon as possible. Tell the gate guard to have Fran Grassley open up Thirteen for you. And have Fran wait. She's our expert at getting answers."

The sheriff put the Angels in the back of his police car and drove them to the prison. They had to wait at the gate until the guard called out the attack dogs' trainers to leash them. While waiting, the sheriff told the guard to get Fran Grassley over to barracks thirteen.

Thirteen was the barred building Kelly had seen during her tour of the prison as the buck-toothed Judith Smithers. By now it was nearing midnight, and apparently Fran had been in bed, because it was about ten minutes before she appeared to open the padlock on the front door.

Inside there was not a stick of furniture. Presumably solitary-confinement prisoners slept on the floor. After leading the way inside and closing the door behind them, Fran gave the sheriff an inquiring look.

"Warden Sorenson will be along in a few minutes," the sheriff said. "She wants you to stick around and ask these girls a few questions."

Fran looked the girls up and down, paying particular attention to Sabrina. "Well, sweet cakes, looks like we're gonna have that little session I kept promising you," she said finally. "Won't that be fun?"

"I doubt it," Sabrina told her.

Turning to the sheriff, Fran said, "We can't mess up those pretty dresses. I'll run over to the administration building, where they changed out of their regular clothes, and bring them back."

"All right," he agreed. "But hurry it up. The warden should be here any minute."

Fran was back within a few minutes, carrying the

girls' smocks, bras, cotton sox, and tennis shoes. Meantime the sheriff had uncuffed the girls. Fran herded them into the latrine and had them change back into their prison clothes.

Warden Sorenson, Karl, and Maxine were there when they all came from the latrine. The warden had changed from her hostess gown into a gray pantsuit, and Maxine and Karl were back in their prison uniforms.

The warden said to the sheriff, "All right, you want to explain it now?"

Sheriff Clint asked, "Remember Garrett's and Duncan's probation officer, who I phoned in L.A.? Feller named John Bosley?"

"I recall you mentioning him."

"Well, Sam Crowder listened in on a long-distance phone conversation between Dan Winston and that same Bosley. Seems he ain't a probation officer after all, but works for this Charles Townsend Investigation outfit I mentioned. Dan was tellin' Bosley that me and him delivered his undercover agents to the prison yesterday. Sam further got from the conversation that what they was doin' here was tryin' to find out what happened to Elizabeth Hunter."

"What did happen to her?" Sabrina asked.

"We'll ask any questions that are gonna be asked around here, sweet cakes," Fran said, aiming a blow at Sabrina's ribs.

This time Sabrina didn't just stand there and take it. Shifting to one side, she grabbed the blonde amazon's wrist as her fist whistled by, swung her hip into her and flipped Fran over her shoulder to land on her back with a crash that shook the building.

"Bet that registered on Louisiana State University's seismograph," Kelly said cheerily.

Maxine threw a backhand slap at her, which missed because Kelly moved her head aside, and the next thing the big woman knew, she was landing on her back next to Fran.

"All right!" the sheriff bawled, jerking out his gun to cover all three Angels. "Hold it right there!"

The girls looked at him meekly. Fran and Maxine painfully climbed to their feet and glared at Sabrina and Kelly.

"String them up," the warden ordered. "All three of them."

Fran went over to unlock the door at the front of the building equivalent to her private quarters in barracks ten. Karl followed after her.

As the pair disappeared into the room, Velma Sorenson said to Sheriff Clint, "What about Dan Winston?"

"Don't worry about him," the sheriff said. "Didn't you hear me refer to him as our dear departed Deputy Dan?"

"You took care of him personally?"

"Sam did."

Fran and Karl reappeared from the front room, Fran carrying three coils of thick rope, Karl carrying a stepladder. The three lengths of rope were fed through large eyebolts screwed into the ceiling. The girls' wrists were tied to the ropes, then Fran pulled on the other end of Sabrina's rope until she hung by her wrists with her toes just clear of the floor, Maxine pulled Jill to a similar position, and Karl hoisted Kelly. The ropes were secured to eyebolts screwed into the wall.

The sheriff didn't put away his gun until all three girls were safely suspended.

Walking over in front of the Angels, Warden Sorenson said, "You girls are going to tell us everything we want to know eventually, of course. It would be simpler if you agreed to answer questions now, before you suffer a lot of physical damage."

"What do you want to know?" Sabrina asked.

"First, who is Charles Townsend?"

Sabrina said, "Like Kelly, I've never met him."

Stepping aside, the warden nodded to Fran. The

blonde amazon whooshed the air out of Sabrina by driving a fist into her stomach.

"Hey!" Jill said. "This isn't worth taking punishment for, girls, particularly since they already know so much. Warden, Charles Townsend is a private investigator. We work for him, but it's the truth that we've never met him. We're just cogs in the organization. You think workers on the assembly line ever meet the president of General Motors?"

Warden Sorenson said to Jill, "Was it Elizabeth Hunter's sister who hired the Townsend agency?"

Jill said, "I told you we're just cogs. We just get assignments. Nobody fills us in on the background. We're like the six hundred. Ours is not to reason why—"

She abruptly cut it off and emitted a gasp of pain when the warden nodded to Maxine and the big woman drove a fist into her stomach.

Kelly said, "Jill, you're not following your own advice. Since they know we work for Charlie, what difference does it make if they know who hired him? Warden, it was Christine Hunter. She didn't believe that escape story."

Warden Sorenson said, "Now you're showing some intelligence, Kelly. There were a couple of other women poking around here recently. A Judith Smithers who claimed to be doing research on rehabilitation programs for women prisoners, and a Minerva Edwards who was supposed to be a reporter for *Newsworld*. Were those Townsend agents too?"

"I wouldn't know about that," Kelly said. "Charlie doesn't tell us everything."

The warden nodded to Karl, who was nearly drooling with impatience to get his hands on Kelly. Circling her slim waist with his large hands, he began to squeeze. Kelly let out a little mew of pain.

Sabrina said, "Warden, if you want us to say those women you mentioned were Townsend agents, we'll sat it. But we really don't know anything about them."

Sheriff Clint said, "I think they were from the at-

torney general's office, Warden. No L.A. private eye would have influence enough to get letters of introduction from the Louisiana attorney general, then get Columbia University and *Newsworld* to lie for him."

Nodding agreement, the warden said, "Turn loose, Karl."

Karl released his double grip with reluctance. Moaning, Kelly drew in great gulps of air.

Twenty

Sheriff Clint said to the warden, "I think we ought to have a little discussion in private."

She gave him a surprised look, then shrugged. "How about my office?" she suggested.

Nodding, he went over to the door and held it open for her. Before following, she said to the three guards, "May as well just let them hang there until we decide what to do with them."

When she and the sheriff got to her office, the warden seated herself behind her desk and Sheriff Clint sank into the chair before it, resting his Stetson on his lap.

"What's on your mind that requires privacy?" she asked.

"It would have been all right to talk about it in front of Karl and Maxine," the sheriff said, "but Fran's never been in on any of the killings."

She made a face. "We're going to have to kill them?"

"What choice do we have? They know too much."

"This isn't like Elizabeth Hunter and those other two girls, though, Sheriff. This Townsend fellow is

bound to raise hell about three of his agents disappearing."

"They don't have to disappear," he said. "The dogs can get them when they try to escape."

After considering this, the warden shook her head. "That would involve the cooperation of the trainers, and we don't want anyone but the four of us in on this."

The sheriff considered also, then gave a reluctant nod. "How about if we have Karl shoot them climbing the fence?"

"Oh, come on, Sheriff," she said irritably. "With witnesses all over the place? And suppose they refused to climb, and just announced to everyone within hearing distance that we were trying to murder them?"

"What, then?" he asked, also irritably.

After thinking, she said reluctantly, "Maybe, after all, the best thing is simply to have them disappear. If this Townsend starts to raise hell, we can simply stone-wall it."

"We'd have to shut down the operation until the heat dies down," the sheriff said.

"Better than taking a murder rap, isn't it? When it does die down, we'll open up again."

"All right," the sheriff agreed. "Karl and I will take care of it."

In barracks thirteen Fran looked at her watch and said, "Damn, it's a quarter to one. The dogs have been pulled for close to an hour. Somebody'll be going over the fence if we don't get them back out there soon."

"Maybe we'd better make a barracks check," Maxine suggested. Then she frowned at the male guard. "Karl, don't try to pull any of your stuff while we're gone. You hear?"

"What stuff?" he inquired in a surly voice.

"You know what I mean. Come on, Fran."

The two female guards went out. Karl gazed at the three women hanging by their wrists with glittering

eyes, his gaze lingering longest on Kelly, who hung between the two other girls. He went over to peer through one of the barred windows at the floodlighted prison yard, then returned to stare at Kelly some more.

In a husky voice he said, "Out in the potato field you said we ought to get together in private. You mean that, or was you just tryin' to butter me up?"

Kelly stared at him with distaste. "Jesus," she said to the other girls. "Can you believe this creep?"

He glowered at her, then let a leering smile form on his heavy face. "You wouldn't have no kicks, baby."

He reached out to stroke her hip, then began to lift the hem of her smock. Jill and Sabrina, hanging only two feet either side of Kelly, instantly reacted. Sabrina's left foot caught Karl in the crotch. As he gasped and bent double in agony, Jill's foot smashed into his Adam's apple, flipping him over on his back, out cold.

Kelly gripped the rope she was hanging from, swung her legs upward until she was upside down, and wound them about the rope. Hanging by her legs, she was able to make the rope lax beneath the point where her legs gripped the rope by raising her hands. Fervently she began to work at the knots.

After gazing at her for a moment, the other two girls aped her.

Kelly got hers loose first. Gripping the rope with both hands, she lowered her feet and dropped to the floor. She was moving the stepladder over when Sabrina dropped to the floor also. She set the stepladder next to Jill, climbed up it, and helped Jill untie the knot binding her wrists. Jill swung herself down to the floor and Kelly jumped down from the stepladder.

They all went over to peer out into the brightly lit prison yard. No one was in sight. Sabrina went over to check the front door and found it unlocked.

"How are we going to get over the fence?" Jill asked.

"Come on!" Kelly said, running for the stepladder.

Instantly understanding, Jill ran after her. It was a ten-foot ladder. Kelly folded it closed and tilted it

toward Jill, who caught it by its top. As Sabrina held open the door, they carried it outside, around the corner of the building, and trotted with it toward the back fence.

They couldn't be seen by the gate guard, because the administration building was between barracks thirteen and the gate. And there were no other guards patrolling at that time of night, because ordinarily the dogs made them unnecessary. They got the ladder set up next to the fence without being seen.

Sabrina went up the ladder first. The fence was two feet higher than the ladder, and the barbed wire atop it rose another foot. However, at intervals there were inward-slanting upright metal angle irons to which the barbed wire was attached. Resting her palm atop one of those, Sabrina vaulted over the fence.

Jill was running up the ladder before Sabrina landed in a crouched position outside the fence. Kelly started up as Jill launched herself into space. A moment later Kelly landed like a cat alongside the other two.

They raced for the edge of the woods only a few yards away.

They were no more than fifty yards into the woods when a siren began to wail. Halting, they looked at each other.

Jill said, "According to my drunken friend, Harold Johnson, they went after Elizabeth Hunter with the dogs. We can't outrun Doberman pinschers."

"Maybe we can outsmart them," Sabrina said, turning right in the direction of the swamp.

When they hit the first moonlit stretch of water, they all stopped to gaze out over it dubiously. It was only a narrow, brackish strip, but it stretched out of sight in both directions, making it impossible to go around it.

"I saw an old movie about this country on TV recently," Jill said. "Walter Brennan got bitten on the cheek by a copperhead."

"I saw that," Kelly said. "It was on the late-late show about a month ago. It wasn't this country. It was the Florida Everglades, and it was a water moccasin."

"No," Jill contested. "It was bayou country, and it was a copperhead."

Behind them in the distance they heard the baying of dogs.

Sabrina said, "I'll risk a snakebite over the fangs of those dogs. But I'd feel better about the whole thing if the subject had never come up."

She waded out into the water, and after a momentary hesitation, Jill and Kelly followed.

Halfway across, Jill said, "There's also quicksand in this country."

Sabrina and Kelly both halted to gaze at her. "You want to continue with us?" Sabrina asked. "Or would you prefer to stay here and play with the dogs?"

"I'll shut up," Jill said meekly.

They continued across to dry ground. But fifty yards beyond that point they came to water again, this time a shallow creek. They decided to wade along it in an attempt to lose the dogs.

They slogged downstream through the water for some distance. Mostly the stream was no more than six inches deep, and never more than two feet. Off in the distance they could still hear the dogs, but there was a whining, uncertain note in their barking, suggesting that they had lost the scent. When the baying grew fainter and fainter, and finally disappeared, they decided their pursuers had chosen to search upstream instead of in their direction.

Coming to a halt, Jill said, "We've lost them."

"Don't get overconfident," Sabrina advised. "When they decide we haven't gone upstream, they'll probably double back this way. And those dogs can find a spot where someone comes out of the water."

They continued on in midstream. Eventually they came to a rustic bridge spanning the water. It offered a perfect place to emerge without touching the creek bank on either side. The bottom of the bridge was only about four feet above the water, making it easy to clamber up onto it. They all walked along the wooden railing, then jumped as far as they could beyond its

end into the center of the road, so as to leave a break in the scent.

It was a narrow dirt road leading out of the swamp. They had followed it about a half mile when they came upon a car parked alongside the road. Although it was a bright moonlit night, trees lining the road on both sides shrouded the car in shadow. They were quite close to it before they could make out that it was a late-model Buick sedan of light blue.

At the same moment they spotted a shadowy figure standing in the ditch alongside the car. It was a man who seemed to be leaning on a shovel.

"Hey, mister," Jill said. "Our car broke down in the swamp. Could you give us a lift?"

He turned toward them as they moved nearer. When they were no more than four feet away, a slight breeze ruffled the overhead foliage enough to let a shaft of moonlight momentarily peep through.

In that brief instant it spotlighted an open grave. Lying in the bottom of it on his back was Deputy Dan Winston.

Twenty-one

Chief Deputy Sheriff Sam Crowder whipped out his gun and covered the three Angels.

"Well, well," he said, sardonically. "Look what crawled out of the swamp."

Driving the spade into the pile of dirt alongside the grave so that it stood upright, he reached through the open front window of the car to lift out a CB microphone.

Keeping the girls covered, he said into the mike, "Smokey Sam to the sheriff's office. You read me?"

A voice from the speaker said, "Joe Klinger here, Sam. What's up?"

"Get in touch with the sheriff, Joe, and have him call me on the CB. Urgent."

"Will do, Sam. Over and out."

As Crowder hung up the microphone, he said conversationally, "We may have a little wait. No point just standin' around." He indicated Jill with his pistol muzzle. "You can take first shift, blondie. Grab that shovel and start filling in that hole."

When Jill merely stared at him in the darkness without making any move to comply, he said matter-of-factly, "If you ain't started in about thirty seconds, I'm gonna stitch your pretty little belly button with thirty-eight-caliber slugs."

Jill grabbed the shovel and began filling in the hole. When she had worked for about five minutes, Crowder ordered Kelly to take over. After another five minutes he had Sabrina take the shovel. She finished filling the grave. Crowder made them all stamp down the dirt, then had Jill even off the top with the shovel and pitch the excess dirt off into the underbrush.

The sheriff still had not called back. The chief deputy removed handcuffs from his belt and linked Kelly's right wrist to Jill's left. Then he reached through the car window to get a second set of cuffs from the glove compartment and shackled Jill's right wrist to Sabrina's left.

He had just put the shovel in the trunk and slammed the lid when the radio speaker said, "Sheriff to Smokey Sam. Come in, Sam."

Crowder rounded to the right-hand front window and reached through for the microphone. "Yeah, Cousin," he said. "I found me three little chippies I kind of imagine you been looking for."

"You got 'em in custody?" the sheriff's voice asked in a tone of surprised relief.

"Strung together like a set of beads."

"Good work, Sam. Reason it took me so long to call you back, I was out with the dogs. Hang on to 'em tight, 'cause they're pretty slippery."

"They won't be going nowhere I don't take 'em," Crowder assured him. "You want 'em back at the prison?"

"No, no," the sheriff said quickly. "Where are you?"

"Little Valley Road, about two miles east of Rustic Pines."

"Take them over to the substation, then. I'll meet you there. I'll be a while, though. I'm about fifteen miles."

"Roger," Crowder said. "Over and out."

The chief deputy took seriously the sheriff's warning about the girls being slippery. Apparently it occurred to him that since two of the girls had free hands, they might try to attack him from behind. He made them kneel on the rear floor, facing backward, with their heads down on the seat.

Sliding behind the wheel, he adjusted the rearview mirror so that he could see into the back seat and announced, "If I see any of them heads raise up, I ain't gonna ask questions. I'm gonna brake fast, turn around, and put a bullet in it. Got it?"

Kelly said sardonically, "We got it, hero."

There was no sign of life in Rustic Pines when Crowder parked the Buick before the sheriff's substation. Ushering the Angels into the building, he drew the blinds. Then they waited.

After a time Jill said, "My feet are wet."

"So are ours," Sabrina said. "That generally happens when you wade in water."

"What time is it?" Kelly asked.

Sam Crowder silently pointed to a clock on the wall. It registered a quarter to three.

Ten minutes later there was the sound of a vehicle pulling up outside, then Sheriff Clint, Velma Sorenson, and Karl Stern came in. Karl was carrying a rifle.

The sheriff examined the manacled girls with satis-

faction. "How'd you run into them?" he asked the chief deputy.

"They run into me. Caught me in the act of burying Dan Winston. I let 'em fill in the grave while we was waiting for your callback."

"That settles it beyond all doubt, doesn't it, Sheriff?" Warden Sorenson said, looking at the girls. "Since they know where Winston's buried, we can't possibly let them go."

"Can you lock me in a cell with them for a while first?" Karl asked in a laryngitic voice. "I got a little score to settle."

"You brought it on yourself," the warden snapped at him. "If you had left them alone, like Maxine told you, they never would have escaped."

Jill asked, "What's the matter with your voice, Karl? Bump your Adam's apple on something?"

Sabrina said, "I thought your voice would turn high instead of low after the kick I gave you."

Glaring from one to the other, he said gutturally, "You won't think it's so funny when the dirt starts hitting your faces."

Warden Sorenson said to the sheriff, "Even though I am sore at Karl for letting them escape, this really simplifies our problem. All the guards at the prison know they escaped and headed for the swamp. It won't be the first time people disappeared without a trace in that swamp."

The sheriff nodded agreement.

"Deputy Crowder can drive me back to the prison. You and Karl take the girls where they won't be found."

Looking at the clock, Karl said in his laryngitic voice, "We can make Pocatow Ridge by light."

"Is that where you buried Elizabeth Hunter?" Sabrina asked.

Warden Sorenson swung toward her. "You'll never live to find out, Sabrina," she said coldly. Then she turned to the sheriff. "Get them out of here. It's been a long night."

Karl grabbed Kelly by the arm and steered her toward the door, which naturally dragged the other girls along with her. He deliberately squeezed her bicep in his large hand, inflicting as much pain as possible. Kelly didn't give him the satisfaction of crying out.

As Karl's other hand was holding a rifle, the sheriff opened the door for him. Karl dragged the girls outdoors and waited for the sheriff to open the back door of the police car. Then he released Kelly's arm and ordered the three to climb in back.

Since there were two of them, Karl and the sheriff weren't as cautious as Sam Crowder had been. They not only didn't bother to recuff the girls individually with their hands behind their backs, but they let them sit in the rear seat facing forward. The sheriff drove, and Karl sat sideways in the front seat, the butt of the rifle across his lap and the barrel resting on the back of the seat.

They drove for over two hours, away from bayou country and into hilly country. It became light enough to see where they were, and the sheriff switched off the headlights. They were traveling along a gravel road through an isolated area of hills studded with tall pine trees.

"Won't be long now, girls," the sheriff said in the tone of one enjoying the ride. "Hope you're appreciatin' the scenery. Sure is pretty country, now, ain't it?"

Sabrina said tonelessly, "It's a vacation paradise."

Jill said, "Mind if we stop at the next gas station to but a postcard to send home?"

Chuckling, the sheriff said, "You girls got spunk, all right. Kinda admire you for that. Yes, sir. Shame we're not all goin' to get to know each other better."

Karl, whose gaze had been on Kelly for most of the trip, pushed the rifle barrel over into the back seat to attempt to hook the gunsight into the top buttonhole of her smock and open the button.

Grinning, he said in a voice still husky from the blow to his Adam's apple, "Yeah, what a shame. I

really am gonna hate to plant you in the ground without giving you something to remember me by."

With her free left hand Kelly pushed the rifle barrel aside. Karl pulled the rifle back across his lap.

"There's Pocatow Ridge up ahead," the sheriff announced.

Karl turned his head forward to look. It was the first time he had completely taken his eyes off the girls since the journey began, and the girls took instant advantage of it. After exchanging a quick glance, Kelly and Sabrina simultaneously lunged forward. Kelly's left arm went around the sheriff's neck and her right shot forward to grip her own left wrist, dragging Jill's left hand along with it. Sabrina's right arm went about Karl's neck and her left hand gripped her right wrist, dragged Jill's right hand with it. Then both girls leaned backward to increase the force of their strangleholds.

The rifle slid from Karl's lap onto the floor and toppled over so that the barrel fell behind the brake pedal and became jammed there. The sheriff lost control of the car, and simultaneously increased its speed because he jammed his feet to the floor in reaction to being strangled, and the right one happened to be on the accelerator.

Sabrina shouted, "Jill, the wheel!"

Since Jill could move either hand only for the six-inch distance of the handcuff chains, there was no way she could obey the plea. The car careened off the road, across a ditch, plowed through fifty feet of underbrush, which managed to slow it sufficiently despite the sheriff's foot being jammed onto the accelerator so that they weren't all killed when it was brought to a sudden halt by ramming head-on into a tree. The force of the impact was enough to make Kelly and Sabrina both release their grips, though, and to throw the sheriff and Karl against the windshield. The rear door on the right popped open.

Everyone in the car was stunned but the girls recovered first.

"Get that rifle!" Kelly said urgently, dragging Jill

over the back of the seat with her as she vainly tried to reach it.

It was obviously hopeless. Not only was it beyond their reach, it was jammed behind the brake pedal and the sheriff's feet were also jammed atop it.

Giving up, Kelly said, "Get the sheriff's pistol!"

Jill dragged Sabrina's left hand along with her right as she tried to reach the pistol, but the sheriff had fallen onto his right side, against Karl, and the holster was beneath him.

"I can't," Jill said frustratedly. "He's lying on it."

"Forget it!" Sabrina said. "Come on!"

She scrambled out the open door, dragging Jill along with her, Jill in turn dragging out Kelly. The three of them plowed through the underbrush back to the road, then halted to look around in all directions.

"Which way?" Jill asked.

Pointing back the way they had come, Sabrina said, "That way!"

Kelly simultaneously pointed in the opposite direction and said, "That way!"

Both girls took off, stretching Jill's arms out straight between them, and were jerked to halts.

"I'm not a yo-yo, you know!" Jill shouted.

They regrouped, got their bearings, and ran off up the road in the direction Kelly had picked.

Twenty-two

Karl Stern and the sheriff simultaneously recovered from their stunned states. Pushing open the door, Karl climbed out, grabbed the rifle stock, and jerked the weapon from beneath the sheriff's feet. A moment

later Sheriff Clint tumbled out the other side, dragging his pistol from its holster.

Karl swung the rifle to his shoulder and snapped a shot at the fleeing girls. The sheriff fired his pistol an instant afterward. Both slugs kicked up dirt at the girls' heels, but then they were around a curve and out of sight.

Karl struggled through the underbrush to the road and began to lope after them. The sheriff reached back into the car and lifted the radio microphone.

"Sheriff One to Central," he snapped angrily.

A voice from the speaker said, "Yes, Sheriff?"

"Bridge me across to Sheriff Two's home phone. Fast."

"Yes, sir."

After a short wait, Sam Crowder's voice said sleepily, "Hello?"

The sheriff said, "Sam, get dressed fast, pick up the dogs at the prison, and get over to Pocatow Ridge as fast as you can."

"Jesus," Crowder said. "They got away *again*?"

"Jus' get movin'," the sheriff snapped. "It took us two hours, moseying along. You should make it in an hour with the hammer down, usin' your siren."

"What siren?" Crowder asked. "With the dogs I'll be using the panel truck."

"Well, whatever you use, stop yappin' and start drivin'," Sheriff Clint bawled.

"Okay, Cousin," the chief deputy said equably. "Be there soon as I can."

Just beyond the curve in the road that had cut them off from the view of Sheriff Clint and Karl, the Angels spotted a firebreak cut into the woods and ran for it. It was about a dozen feet wide and ran straight as a string for a hundred yards, gradually climbing until it disappeared over a crest. They raced along it, weaving erratically because of being linked together, but nevertheless eating up ground. They even managed to increase their speed when Karl's rifle sounded again and they heard the slug whistle by.

They pounded up the grade to the crest, then came to an abrupt halt. Instead of the firebreak continuing on over the hill, as they had expected, it ended at a riverbank. They gazed down in consternation at the fast-running mountain stream that cut through the hillside twenty feet below them.

The rifle cracked a third time and dirt spurted an inch from Jill's right foot, spattering her leg.

Jill jumped off the bank, dragging the other two girls with her. The stream was no more than fifteen feet across, but it was deep, cold, and moving at torrential speed. They plunged beneath the water, came up sputtering and were swept downstream.

They let the current take them, struggling only to stay afloat. Kelly and Sabrina raised their cuffed wrists above the water in order to keep Jill's head above it, and paddled with their free hands. For the first couple of hundred yards they made no attempt to get ashore, content to let the rushing current take them as far from their pursuer as possible.

But then an ominous roaring noise sounded from downstream, steadily growing louder.

"What's that?" Kelly shouted, then realized what it was and answered herself. "Waterfall! Let's get out of here!"

She headed for the left bank. At the same moment Sabrina headed for the right one. Jill's head went under water. They converged again, and this time both headed for the left bank.

The roar of the waterfall came heart-stoppingly nearer. Kelly and Sabrina paddled furiously with their free hands and all three girls churned their legs in scissors kicks, but still they continued to be swept downstream.

They were no more than thirty feet from the falls when Kelly's feet finally touched bottom. She lunged for an overhanging branch managed to grip it, and pulled herself into waist-deep water. She pulled Jill to her feet, and Jill pulled Sabrina. The three of them

stood gasping and spewing water for a full minute before scrambling ashore.

After resting a few moments more, they walked down to peer over the edge of the falls. The water cascaded downward a full thirty feet onto jagged rocks. After looking at each other, they cut off into the underbrush, away from the stream.

Upstream at the point where they had plunged into the water, Karl stood on the bank peering downstream for a time, then began to follow along the bank. The bank became lower after the stream cut through the hill, until finally there was a drop of no more than two feet down to the water.

He carefully scanned both sides of the stream for signs of where they might have climbed from the water. As he got closer and closer to the waterfall without seeing any such sign, he began to suspect they had been carried over the falls. But almost to the falls he finally spotted the signs he had been looking for. On the mud bank on the opposite side of the stream, next to a tree branch that protruded out over the water, were three sets of footprints.

There was no way he could get across the stream at that point. He made his way back upstream and returned to the police car.

Sheriff Clint was seated on the ground alongside the road with his back against a tree. Looking up at Karl, he said, "Yeah?"

"They jumped into Knife River, rode the current almost to the falls, and climbed out the other side. Only way they can go is east. Probably come out at Grass Valley. There's a bridge over the river a mile farther on. If we had dogs, we could track 'em down easy."

"We will have," the sheriff said. "Sam's bringin' 'em." He looked at his watch. "You been gone a good half hour, and I called him right after you took off after them girls. Sam oughta be here in another half hour."

The Angels found it slow going through the woods,

because the area was heavily underbrushed. It was also crossed with streams. None were as fast or deep as the river they had tumbled into, though, and they were able to ford them without difficulty.

Eventually they came out of the woods into a broad, flat valley floored with knee-high grass. Off in the distance there was a dirt road running across the valley from right to left. At one spot in the road, perhaps three miles from them, they could see three flat-roofed buildings clustered together. From that distance they couldn't make out what the buildings were, but they headed for them.

By now it was past six A.M. and the sun was well up. Their clothing and hair dried as they walked, and even their soaked tennis shoes stopped sloshing.

Sam Crowder followed the sheriff's instructions and drove the panel truck all the way to Pocatow Ridge with the hammer down. For most of the distance the roads weren't made for high speed, but he seldom got below seventy, and for stretches got up to ninety. He made it in eighty minutes from the time the sheriff's phone call got him out of bed.

He found the sheriff and Karl Stern waiting alongside the road near the wrecked police car. Getting out, he gazed for a time at the wrecked car nearly fifty yards from the road before saying anything.

Then he asked, "What happened?"

"What's it matter?" the sheriff asked testily, disliking to think about it. "They got away. But they're still linked together, and we know which way they're headin'. You got the Dobermans?"

The chief deputy shook his head. "I figured in strange country we'd better go first-class. I brought Cousin Jed's bloodhounds. Also the dresses the gals wore to the party for the dogs to sniff at."

"Well, that was smart," Sheriff Clint said with faint surprise.

"Warden's idea," Crowder said briefly.

They all climbed into the cab of the truck, Karl in the middle and Crowder driving. Karl, who knew the

country better than the other two, directed the chief deputy to drive straight along the gravel road for another mile to a point where it curved toward Knife River. Shortly afterward they crossed a bridge over the river, and Karl told Crowder to pull over and park.

As they all got out, Karl said, "Now we got to cut down-stream along the bank for over a mile to where they come out of the water on this side. It'll be rough goin', but there's no way to drive in there."

"No rougher for us than for them gals," Crowder said philosophically.

He opened the back door of the panel truck, patted the heads of the two bloodhounds in back, and attached leashes to their collars. Then he lifted out two walkie-talkies and handed one to the sheriff and the other to Karl.

"Case we get separated," he said.

"We are gonna get separated," Karl said. "Right now. Sheriff, if you follow this road in the truck for about six miles, it circles around and comes out at this end of Grass Valley Road. It's about three times as far by road as the way we're going, but I figure that's where they'll come out, and we may need the truck. Okay?"

The sheriff nodded dourly, not liking to be on the receiving end of orders, but realizing it was a sound plan. He climbed under the wheel of the truck, carrying his walkie-talkie with him.

Crowder took a plastic bag from the back of the truck and handed it to Karl. "The party dresses," he explained.

Then he tugged on the twin leashes to make the dogs jump down, and closed the back door of the truck. "Okay, Cousin," he called. "You can take off."

When the Angels got within a half mile of the cluster of buildings, they saw that the buildings consisted of a gas station, a service garage, and what looked like some sort of storage shed. There was no one in sight, and the place had an air of desertion about it.

When they got within a quarter mile, they realized it was deserted. The windows of the service garage and the gas station were boarded up. Then, when they got within a hundred yards, they saw something that cheered them.

Kelly spotted it first, and pointed with her free hand. "Look."

Following her pointing finger with their eyes, the other girls saw it too. The storage shed had only three sides, and the open end faced them. Inside it they could make out a vehicle.

"Hey, a pickup truck!" Jill said happily.

"Let's go," Sabrina said, breaking into a trot.

They ran the last distance, then halted just outside the shed to gaze at the pickup truck with disappointment. It was ancient, rusted—and up on blocks. The wheels were nowhere in sight.

"Oh, terrific," Jill said with disgust.

Kelly's gaze settled on a toolbox at the rear of the shed. Dragging the others over to it, she knelt to open the lid. Then she emitted a little squeal of triumph. There were only a few tools in the box, but one of them was a welcome sight.

"Bolt cutters!" Kelly said. "How about that?"

Sabrina said happily, "Let's get these shackles off."

Lifting out the bolt cutters, Kelly rose to her feet, gripped the cutters with both hands, and told Sabrina and Jill to stretch tight the chain between the handcuffs linking them together. When they had the chain stretched taut, Kelly gripped it in the jaws of the tool and exerted pressure. The chain snapped.

Kelly handed the bolt cutters to Sabrina, who was now free, although the cuff with three inches of chain hanging from it still circled her wrist. Kelly and Jill stretched tight the chain linking them together, and Sabrina severed it with the bolt cutters.

As Kelly and Jill stepped free of each other, Jill examined the cuffs still circling each of her wrists and asked, "Think those cutters would go through these?"

"No," Kelly said. "Those are going to take a hack-

saw. But count your blessings. At least you won't get your arms pulled out of their sockets the next time Sabrina and I head in opposite directions."

Suddenly Sabrina cocked her head. "Listen," she commanded.

The other two girls listened. Off in the distance there was a baying sound.

"The Dobermans?" Jill asked. "How would they get them here so fast?"

"Fast?" Kelly said. "We've been two and a half hours at least getting here. And they aren't Dobermanns anyway."

"What, then?" Jill asked.

"Bloodhounds."

They went to the front of the shed and peered in the direction from which the baying was coming. Halfway between them and the woods they had come through, two bloodhounds were straining at their leashes, pulling along a tall man in a deputy sheriff's uniform. Beside him strode a man in the uniform of a prison guard, carrying a rifle.

"About a mile and a half away," Kelly said. "That looks like Sam Crowder with the dogs, and the other one has to be Karl Stern. What are we going to do?"

Twenty-three

"First we've got to keep a building between us and them, so they can't see us," Sabrina said. "Then we need to kill our scent."

"How?" Jill asked.

"Gasoline. And fortunately the pumps are on this side of the building. Let's see if they work."

"They wouldn't work," Kelly said. "The place is abandoned."

Nevertheless she hurried after the other girls as they ran toward the pumps, keeping the gas station office between them and the men with the dogs. Halfway there Sabrina stopped to point triumphantly at a sign on the door of the gas station office. It read CLOSED FOR VACATION DURING THE MONTH OF JULY.

"It's not abandoned," she crowed. "It's just closed."

But when they reached the pumps, she gazed in consternation at the padlocks on them.

"The bolt cutters!" Kelly cried, heading back for the shed at a dead run.

Sabrina said to Jill, "Get a bucket!"

"What's wrong with that one?" Jill asked, pointing at one sitting between the pumps.

Sabrina peered into it, saw there was about an inch of water in the bottom, and dumped it out. Kelly came running back with the bolt cutters.

"Do we want regular, premium, or unleaded?" she asked.

"Anything!" Sabrina said. "Bloodhounds don't care. Hurry up! The dogs are getting closer."

Kelly used the bolt cutters on the padlock of the regular gas pump. The sound of the dogs was much closer now. Jill ran over to peer around the corner of the gas station office.

"The dogs have them almost running," she called. "They aren't more than three-quarters of a mile away."

Sabrina switched on the pump and ran a bucketful of gasoline. As she began to carry it toward the storage shed, Jill called, "Bree, they're now in position where they can see the entrance to the shed."

Sabrina stopped six feet short of the shed, looked over her shoulder through the space between the shed and the gas station office, and backed another step when she glimpsed the dogs just coming into view. She pitched the bucket of gasoline toward the shed, soaking an area on the ground about a foot wide from the corner of the shed to where she was standing.

She hurried back to the pump and Kelly ran another bucketful as she held the bucket. It took three buckets altogether to splash a path of gasoline from the shed to the corner of the gas station office nearest the shed. Sabrina drew one more bucketful and tossed it over the gasoline-soaked line to form a puddle just beyond it.

"Now what?" Kelly asked.

Sabrina pointed to the service garage, which was between the other two buildings, but was set back about fifty feet from them. "We hole up there until they give up and go away. Come on. And bring the bolt cutters, because the place is probably locked."

As Jill and Kelly followed her, Sabrina said, "Watch what I do, and do the same."

She jumped across the gasoline line into the puddle of gas just beyond it, rubbed the rubber soles of her tennis shoes in it thoroughly, then hurried along the side of the gas station office building to peer around the corner. The other two girls followed her example.

While they would be out of sight of the men with the dogs when they reached the sliding-door entrance to the service garage, it was necessary to cross an open space of about a dozen feet in full view to get there. The man controlling the dogs was too preoccupied with them to be a problem, but they were going to have to pick a time to dash across when the rifleman wasn't looking that way.

The dogs were making a constant uproar now, as the scent became stronger. Drawing back her head, Sabrina said, "They're less than a half mile away now." She peered toward the repair garage. "That sliding door's padlocked. Kelly, you go first and get the door open. I'll say when."

Kelly nodded. Sabrina peeked around the corner again. Their hunters were now close enough for her to recognize them. As the Angels had guessed, the dog handler was Sam Crowder and the rifleman was Karl Stern.

At that moment Crowder stumbled to his knees

and nearly lost the dogs. Karl dropped his rifle and grabbed the twin leashes to bring them to a howling halt until Crowder could get to his feet again.

"Now, all of us!" Sabrina said, and took off running.

The other girls raced after her. As they reached the shelter of the other building, Jill said, "I thought we were going to do it one at a time."

"There was never going to be a better chance," Sabrina explained. "The dogs almost got away from them, and they were both too busy getting them back under control to look this way."

Kelly used the bolt cutters on the padlock, then picked up the pieces. "It would be a giveaway to leave them lying here," she said.

Sabrina slid open the sliding metal door just far enough for the three of them to slip inside, then slid it closed again. With the windows boarded over, that left them in the dark. She slid it back open long enough for Kelly to find a light over a workbench and turn it on, then closed it again.

Kelly laid the bolt cutter on the workbench and tossed the broken lock into a nearby trash can. The three girls looked around.

It was a typical auto service garage, with racks of tools against the walls and two hydraulic vehicle hoists, both in the down position. A two-and-a-half-ton truck similar to the one that had taken them back and forth to the potato fields, but without a tarp cover, was parked over one of the hoists. In one corner was a pile of new tires. In another were four wheels with tires on them, presumably the ones belonging to the pickup truck up on blocks in the storage shed.

Sabrina turned to examine the inside of the sliding metal door. There was an inside bolt. She slid it home.

"Now let 'em search their heads off," she said with satisfaction. "By the time they get here, that spilled gasoline will be too much evaporated for the men to notice it, but the dogs will be fully aware of it. They'll keep leading them to the storage shed, which ought to drive them crazy."

"Suppose they try to break in here?" Jill asked.

"I don't think they can, unless they rip the boards off a window. Eventually they're bound to give up and go away."

"But suppose they do rip the boards off?" Jill insisted. "I think we ought to find a place to hide."

They all looked around again. Kelly pointed to a ladder nailed flush to the right wall, on the side of the building away from their approaching hunters, leading to a trapdoor in the ceiling.

"The roof!" she said.

Jill ran over and climbed the ladder. Pushing open the trapdoor, she climbed through, lay on her stomach, and peered back down.

As Sabrina began to climb, Jill said, "Now there's a disgusting sight."

Pausing halfway up, Sabrina asked, "What?"

"That truck's full of baskets of potatoes."

Sabrina glanced down, made a face, and continued to climb.

Kelly switched off the light over the workbench before climbing to the roof. She closed the trapdoor behind her, and the three of them crawled to the center of the roof. It was a flat roof, but there was no wall around its edges, so they had to lie prone to avoid being seen by the approaching men.

The frenzied baying of the hounds was quite near now. Then they also heard the sound of an approaching vehicle.

Sabrina risked raising her head to look in the direction from which the engine sound was coming. A panel truck was driving along the dirt road from the west, moving slowly because of the rutted and washboard road surface.

"Gray panel truck coming," she announced. "Maybe it's somebody coming to our rescue."

She lowered her head again.

The clamoring dogs were now over in front of the gas station office, their barking and growling indicating that they were dragging their handler toward the

storage shed. Over the din the girls heard Karl Stern shout, "Think we got 'em cornered, Sheriff!"

Sabrina risked raising her head for another look. Karl was speaking into a walkie-talkie with his gaze on the approaching panel truck. She looked toward it, saw it was now only about a quarter mile away, then lowered her head again.

"Scratch that hope of rescue," she said. "That's Sheriff Clint in the panel truck."

Sheriff Clint pulled up in front of the gas pumps and got out of the panel truck. The dogs were straining at their leashes in front of the open end of the storage shed, and Karl was just coming from the shed with his rifle held at trail position.

"The dogs think they're in there, but they aren't," Karl called to the sheriff.

Sam Crowder let the dogs pull him into the shed. They circled the pickup truck up on blocks and came out again, whining in puzzlement. They drew Crowder over to the pumps, sniffed around them, then pulled him back to the shed again. This time when they led him back outdoors, they halted and looked up at him sadly, their tails drooping, ashamed of themselves because their noses kept telling them the lie that their quarries were in the shed.

Karl gazed around in all directions over the flat, grass-covered valley. "Think they could have hitched a ride out of here?" he asked puzzledly. "I guess getting a car would kill their scent, wouldn't it?"

Grunting noncommittally, Sheriff Clint stooped to pick up the broken padlock lying next to the regular gas pump. After glancing at the pump, he tossed the lock aside and bent to sniff at the water bucket next to the gas pump.

"Gasoline would kill it, too," he said. "They're in one of them buildings."

Twenty-four

The sheriff went over to examine the gas station office. The door was padlocked. After checking the padlock, he made a complete circuit of the building examining each of the boarded-up windows.

"Not in there," he decided. "Let's check the other one."

Karl followed him over to the service garage. Sam Crowder pulled the dogs over there, too, but they weren't particularly interested in going. After sniffing around the sliding door apathetically, they sat on their tails.

The sheriff tried the sliding door, made a circuit of the building, checking its boarded-up windows, and returned to try the sliding door again.

"Locked from inside," he said. "They're in there. Karl, see if you can find a crowbar."

While Karl was going after the crowbar, Crowder decided there was no point in keeping the dogs out anymore, and put them back in the panel truck.

Karl returned from the storage shed with a two-foot pinchbar. Handing it to the sheriff, he said, "Best I could do."

Handing it back, Sheriff Clint said, "See if you can get that door open."

Karl gazed at him for a moment, then shrugged, laid his rifle on the ground, and attempted to jimmy the door. He couldn't budge it.

"No way," he said, giving up.

"Then pry the boards off one of them windows."

With the sheriff following him, Karl walked around

to the side of the building nearest the gas station office. The bottom of the single window there was about seven feet above the ground. He went around to the other side and found a similar window there. With the sheriff still trailing after him, and with Sam Crowder now joining the parade, he went around behind the building. There were no windows there, but there was a door with a Yale lock.

After trying the door, Karl said disgustedly, "That sliding door's locked from the inside because the owner came out this way. Nobody's in there."

Taking off his Stetson, the sheriff scratched his head. "They gotta be," he said stubbornly. "Nowhere else for them to be."

"They got in a car, Sheriff. Maybe one was parked there by the shed, and they stole it. That'd account for the scent stopping right there."

The sheriff put his hat back on, pursed his lips and looked around. Then he had a sudden idea and gazed upward.

"Hey, they could be on the roof."

"Where's the ladder?" the chief deputy inquired.

"They pulled it up after them," Sheriff Clint said testily.

After considering, Crowder said, "Maybe. Easy to check out. There's another ladder in that shed."

Up above, the girls had heard every word of the conversation. Sabrina whispered, "Time to go below."

As quietly as possible they crawled across to the trapdoor. Sabrina eased it open and was the first one down the ladder. Jill went last and closed the trapdoor behind her. Just as she eased it closed, she heard the bump of a ladder being placed against the side of the building.

Sabrina had switched on the light over the work-bench before Jill closed the trapdoor. Joining her and Kelly, Jill said, "He's bound to open that trapdoor and look in. Better turn that off and we'll hide under the truck."

Sabrina said, "If he looks in, he'll probably climb

down the ladder." She looked at the truck loaded with potatoes. "Wonder if that thing runs?"

"Probably not," Kelly said. "Or it wouldn't be sitting in a repair garage."

"What have we got to lose?" Sabrina asked, heading for it. "Jill, stand by to slide the door open, and then jump aboard."

Nodding, Jill went over to grip the knob of the inside bolt of the sliding door, but didn't yet draw it open. Sabrina climbed behind the wheel of the truck, and Kelly got into the cab from the other side.

"No keys!" Sabrina said.

Kelly pulled down both sun visors, but there were no keys on them. She bent to rummage around on the floor.

Jill heard the trapdoor above begin to open. She ran over to switch off the light, then returned to her post. Looking up as the trapdoor opened, she saw uniformed legs coming through it.

The open trapdoor allowed in enough light for Kelly and Sabrina to see by. Kelly straightened up, whispered, "Keys! They were under the mat," and handed them to Sabrina.

Sabrina turned on the ignition and ground the starter. Jill, her gaze still on the ladder, saw Chief Deputy Sam Crowder descending. The starter ground again, but the engine failed to catch. Crowder paused six feet above the floor and began to reach for his holstered gun.

Jill ran over, reached up to grab the man by both ankles, and jerked his feet outward. Crowder forgot about his gun, made a desperate grab for a ladder rung, missed, and his falling weight broke the grip of his other hand. He fell at an angle, his toes hitting the floor first, then his knees, then the palms of his hands.

From behind, Jill kicked him in the crotch. As he collapsed in a groaning heap, she ran back to the door for the third time.

The truck's engine caught, sputtered, then caught again. Sabrina noisily shifted into low.

Jill drew back the bolt, gave the sliding door a tremendous push that slid it wide open with a resounding bang, and raced past the front of the truck to jump into the open door of the cab as the truck began to roll. She slammed the cab door closed.

Sabrina gave it the gun and they roared out of the garage. The sheriff and Karl came running around from the side of the garage, but by then Sabrina had shifted into second and they were turning east onto the dirt road. As Sabrina bore down on the gas, Karl's rifle cracked. There was the zinging sound of the slug hitting the tailgate and ricocheting off.

Sabrina shifted forward another gear and gave it more gas. The rifle cracked again; a small hole appeared in the rear window and another appeared in the windshield, about halfway between Kelly and Jill. But by then they were a hundred yards away. They were two hundred by the time Karl fired again, and he missed completely.

There were no more shots, but suddenly the truck's engine began to cough. The truck slowed.

"What's wrong?" Jill asked. "Don't tell me we're running out of gas."

Glancing at the fuel gauge, Sabrina said, "Nearly full. This is why it was in the repair garage. It's missing like crazy."

The engine sputtered, almost died, then caught again and the truck picked up speed. But it continued to run sluggishly. Sabrina shifted down to get it to accelerate, then shifted back into high when it had accelerated to the speed she wanted.

Looking back through the rear window, Jill said, "Here comes the panel truck."

Kelly looked back too. "They're gaining. They're only about a hundred yards back."

"Pour it on, Sabrina," Jill said. "Pour it on."

"I'm giving it all she's got," Sabrina said.

The truck engine coughed again, then suddenly began to run properly. They picked up speed and began to pull away from the panel truck. The two-and-a-half-

ton truck, being much heavier, actually was the faster vehicle on this rutted washboard road, because it had better traction.

They had a three-hundred-yard lead when they came to the end of the valley and began to climb into hilly country again. But then they hit pavement and lost the advantage of weight. The panel truck began to close the interval.

"They're gaining again!" Kelly said.

Jill said, "We need a diversion."

"Like?" Kelly asked.

Pushing open the cab door, Jill said, "Come on, I'll show you."

"At sixty miles an hour?" Kelly said on a high note.

"Seventy," Sabrina said.

"Who's counting?" Jill asked as she swung herself out on the running board, gripped the edge of the truck bed, and pulled herself up over it into the back of the truck.

Kelly said, "Sometimes I worry about her."

She pushed out onto the running board, too, and also climbed into the back of the truck. The wind slammed the cab door.

The panel truck was no more than fifty yards back now. The girls could see that the sheriff was driving, Sam Crowder was in the middle, and Karl was on the right side. Karl poked his rifle out the window, but didn't fire because they started around a curve.

Lifting a bushel basket of potatoes, Jill shouted to Kelly above the wind created by their speed, "Mashed potatoes!"

Nodding understanding, Kelly lifted a basket, too. They heaved the baskets out of the truck, immediately picked up two more, and heaved them.

The panel truck swerved past the first two baskets, but then there were potatoes all over the road, being crushed beneath the wheels, and bushel baskets were bouncing off the hood and the windshield. The sheriff attempted to brake, skidded on crushed potatoes, and

simultaneously lost forward visibility as a blizzard of baskets hit the windshield.

The panel truck plowed through a wooden guard rail to plunge into a ravine. Halfway down, the back door burst open and the two bloodhounds tumbled out. The truck continued on to smash nose down into a large boulder and burst into flame.

Sabrina skidded the two-and-a-half-ton truck to a halt on the shoulder and got out. Jill and Kelly jumped down from the rear, and all three of them ran back to gaze down at the burning car.

"They'll never get out alive," Kelly said quietly.

After a short pause, Jill said, "Neither did Elizabeth Hunter and Dan Winston."

The two bloodhounds came scrambling up the bank, whining piteously, their tails between their legs. Kelly stooped to pat their heads.

"It's all right, fellows," she said soothingly. "We'll see that you'll eventually get back to your owner, whoever he is." Then she rose to her feet and said to Jill and Kelly, "Let's get to a phone and call Charlie."

Several days later the three Angels were seated in the agency office, waiting for John Bosley to appear. Charlie had already phoned and was on the squawk-box.

Charlie's voice said, "How does it feel to be out from behind bars, angels?"

"Not funny, Charlie," Sabrina said.

Jill said, "I soaked in a hot tub for two days, and still haven't gotten rid of the aches."

"Well, your efforts are appreciated by a lot of people," Charlie said. "Including the governor. I received a call from him commending you on a job well done. He also has another prison he'd like us to look into."

The Angels exchanged looks. Kelly asked, "What did you tell him, Charlie?"

"I told him we'd think about it."

Jill said, "Why don't you check that one out your-

self, Charlie? After all, a women's prison is filled with women."

"A tempting thought, angel, but I couldn't come close to doing the job you did in Pine Parish. The crooked setup in Rustic Pines is being investigated by the bar association. Your friend Linda has been released. As for your friendly keepers, Maxine has been charged with various crimes, and Fran, who apparently was guilty only of brutality, has been dismissed."

"What about the warden?" Sabrina asked.

"The state attorney general expects that she'll be indicted for conspiracy to commit murder."

"Christine Hunter, Charlie," Jill said. "How did she take the news about Elizabeth?"

"Hard, but she was also grateful for your efforts. Tell Bosley to forget billing Miss Hunter. I think this one we can absorb."

Bosley came into the room with a fragile-looking red-haired girl. "I'm right here, sir," he said. "And I've brought a friend."

"Linda!" Kelly said in surprise, gazing at Linda Oliver.

Smiling, Linda said, "I just wanted to stop by to thank you while I was here for my interview."

"Interview?" Sabrina asked.

Bosley said, "Charlie thought it time we hired a receptionist for out front."

"I hope I'll measure up," Linda said earnestly.

Smiling, Jill said, "With those legs, don't worry about it, Linda. You're home free." She turned toward the squawkbox. "Right, Charlie?"

"Well, angel, typing, shorthand, and a pleasant phone manner are important, but then again, there *is* something to be said for legs."

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